

Losing our heritage?

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"It's just a village," or "You call this a city?" or, "Lahore's too feudal-provincial-closed..." are met with defenses bringing to the fore Lahore's beauty, warmth, history, culture etc etc. All very valid, one has to admit.

BUT. There's a big BUT. Where does all this fierce pride go when Lahore is threatened? One of the best things about Lahore is its pre-partition buildings. Yet, they are being knocked down left, right and centre, to make room for plazas, plazas and more plazas; and other than the odd grumble, nobody does anything about it. Not only do such plazas threaten old localities and buildings, they also contribute substantially to the traffic problems that already exist, especially on crowded thoroughfares like The Mall.

There are, however, a few honourable exceptions to the rule - for instance, the Lahore Conservation Society which was formed in 1985. With Governor Jillani's help, they managed to list forty seven of Lahore's landmark buildings in the Punjab Special Premises (Preservation) Ordinance, 1985. In fact, they were instrumental in getting this ordinance passed in the first place. But not all of Lahore's landmark buildings were put on this list, and now, a major controversy has cropped up regarding the demolition of Lakshmi Mansions (Ahmed Mansions) on the corner of The Mall and Hall Road.

Lakshmi Mansions traders and residents are fighting against the demolition, which they say is illegal. They cite various court orders which state that the building's custodian is the Lakshmi Insurance Company and the Enemy Property Management Board. Accordingly, the building cannot be bought or sold, nor can its occupants be alienated or ejected without express permission of the custodian. Building occupants have obtained stay orders from the court and there are several litigations con-

cerning this valuable property.

Conservationists argue that the building is a landmark of the city, and should not be pulled down, no matter who owns it. Although it is not listed in the special premises ordinance, they say that it should be.

Residents living in the apartments behind the main Lakshmi Mansions building are also concerned about the issue. They argue that their residential area and the main building are part of the same scheme, built in the 1920s by the Lakshmi Insurance Company; if the main building is demolished and a plaza built in its place, their privacy and peace will be threatened. They name Sohail Zia Butt, MPA, as the person responsible, saying that a year ago, their parking space was forcibly blocked by his men; that space has now been occupied by the bricks thrown down from the demolition work that has been taking place behind Lakshmi Mansions. In addition the rubble caused by the demolition has blocked their sewage systems, and the dust raised by falling bricks is also causing pollution.

Residents of the area also complain that for the last week, bricks torn from the building have been loaded onto trolleys at all odd hours of the night and early morning, making a great din and disturbing sleep. They feel that such activity should be curbed on public nuisance grounds, besides the fact that as long as a stay order exists, material from the building should not be removed, let alone sold as has been happening. They are indignant about a banner that was placed on the site on January 28, advertising 'old building materials for sale.'

Occupants of the main building had obtained a civil court stay order against the demolition in the last week of January, but these orders were ignored. A local commission was then appointed by the court, to look into the matter. The commission reported that demolition work was being car-

ried out despite the stay orders, and a contempt of court notice was served to Sohail Zia Butt. Residents and traders report that the work continued nonetheless, creating a nuisance for them, besides being against court orders.

Photographs taken on January 21, January 29 and February 2 provide visual evidence of the building's destruction. It was only after a delegation met with Mian Shahbaz Sharif on February 1, that some action was taken to prevent this. A meeting with the Deputy Commissioner Lahore on February 3 was also fruitful, and the district administration has now brought a temporary halt to the demolition. In the meantime, litigation continues.

A great deal of noise has also been made through the press, involving not only letters to newspaper editors, but also press releases by a recently formed organization, the Lahore Concerned Citizens Society, which has taken up this cause. The Society organised a press conference on January 31, at which the main speakers were Malik Meraj Khalid, representing Lakshmi Man-

sions residents and I.A. Rehman of the Lahore Conservation Society. Also present were Khwaja Zaheer of the Lahore Conservation Society, and residents and traders of the Lakshmi Mansions and other buildings like Waris Road, Shadman Road, and several other conservationists.

Speaking of his own area, Mr Rehman pointed out that the special character of the area is being lost, giving way to plazas and the area is becoming more crowded with more cars. There is no space for the residents and the privacy of the residents is being violated. He also pointed out that the foot limit on the heights of buildings in these areas is being violated.

In fact, he said, all areas are being affected by commercialism - you can't even walk on the streets of the buildings on Nisbat Pura Road on weekdays due to the



Malik Meraj Khalid addressing the press conference



Ahmed Mansions: front facade

By Beena Sarwar

Lahore L'hore aey' ...Jiney L'hore nai waikhia oa jamian ee nahin'. Such sayings may jar on the inhabitants of other cities, but they are truly representative of the Lahori's feelings. Lahoris, it has been observed, have a fierce pride in their city and will fight to death (almost) rather than be convinced otherwise. Dismissive statements from kattar Karachiites (me) like