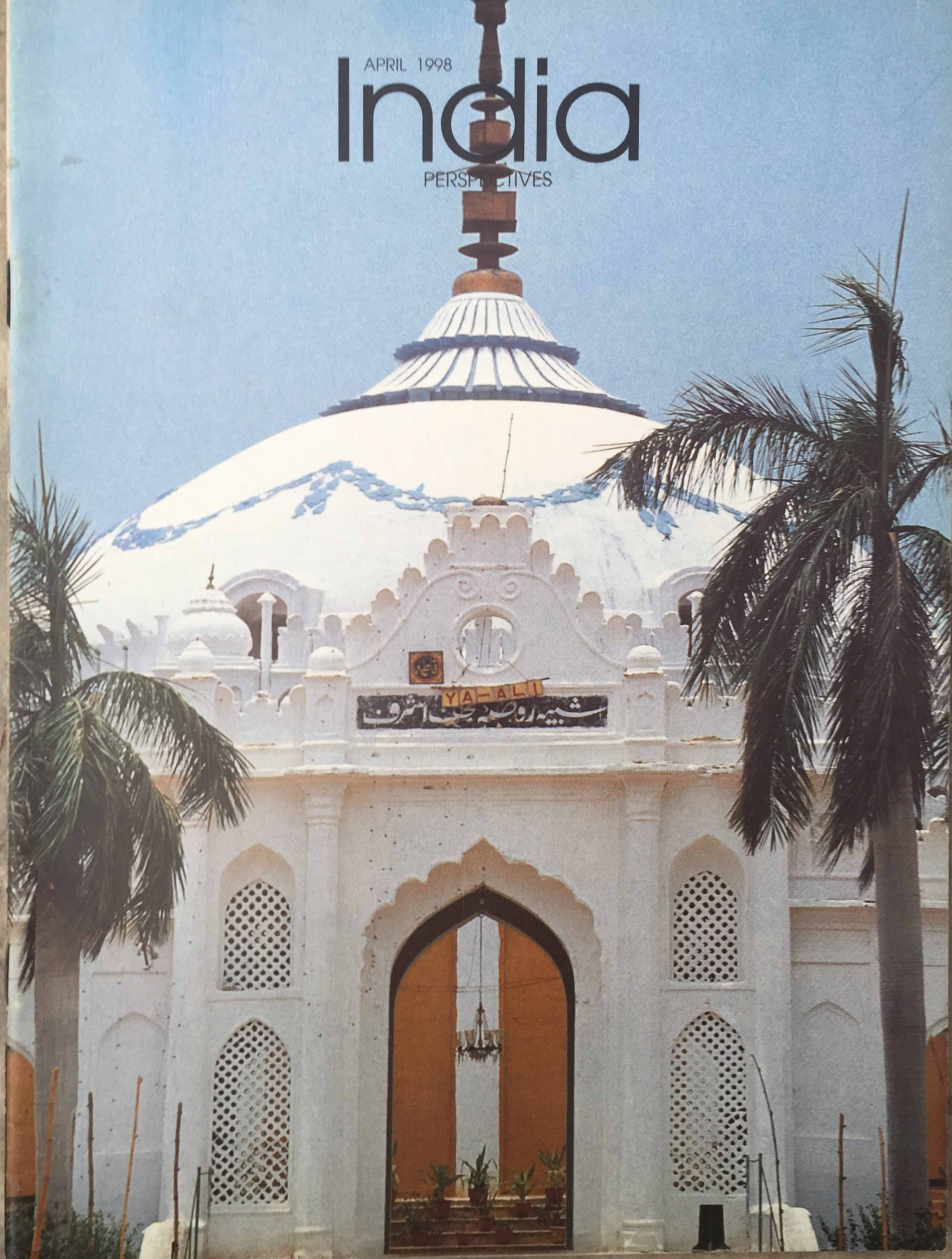


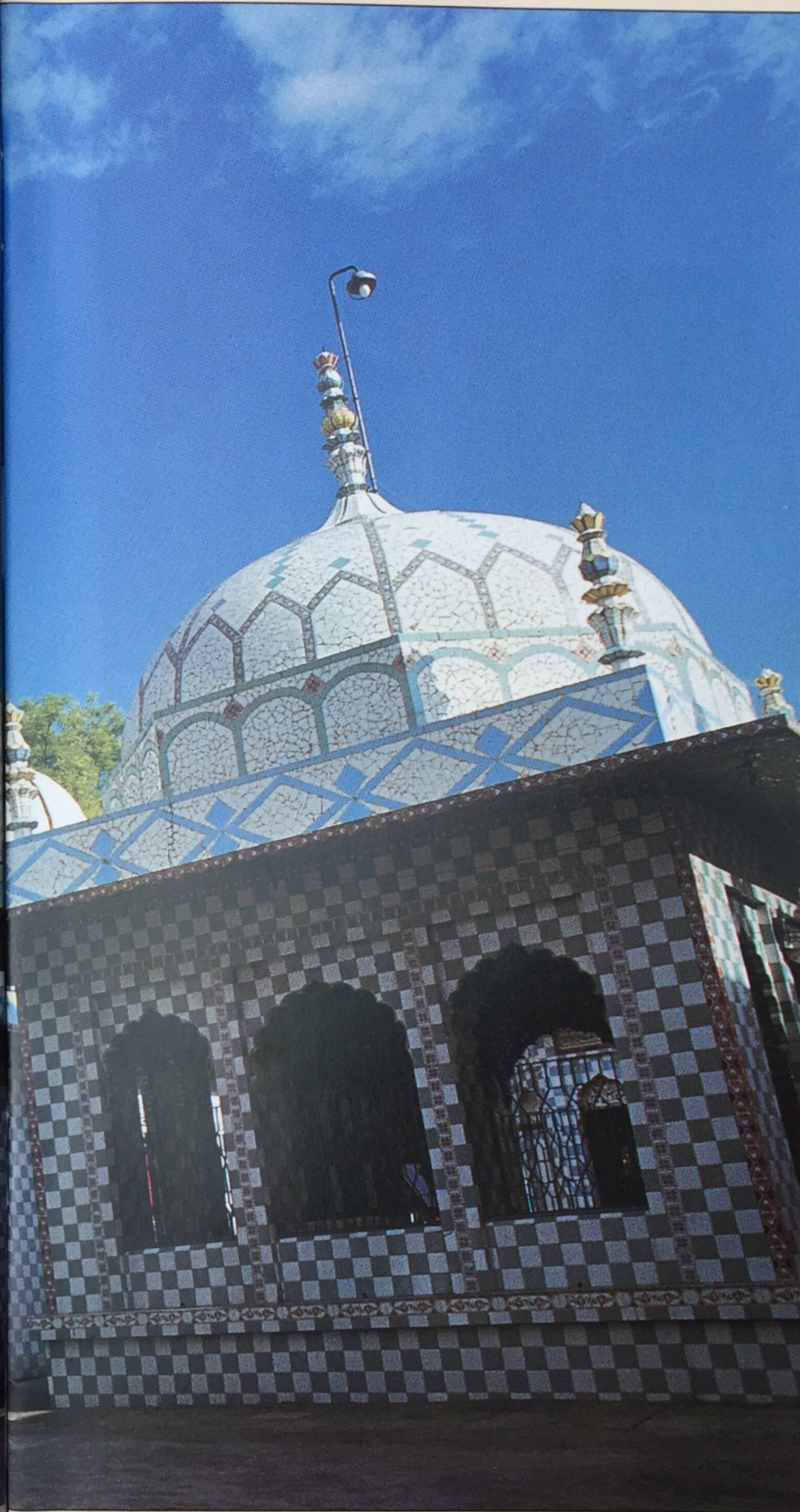
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India

PERSPECTIVES







IMAMBARAS OF INDIA

FUSION OF FAITH AND
GRANDEUR

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Certain values attached to religious monuments are peculiar to them and to them alone. Three of these values, which may be called spiritual, aesthetic and cultural, are of particular importance, because each one affects the ways in which religious monuments can be explained and interpreted to those who wish to see or understand them.

The Imambara is an Indian institution more popular with the Shias who assemble here during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic Calendar. Unlike a mosque, there is no set pattern for an Imambara. Its style, architecture and unity varies with local cultural influence. In south India, for instance, it is called an Ashurkhana.

As soon as the moon of Muharram is sighted, Shias abandon their festivities and prepare for the Azadari (a period of mourning for two months and eight days) by attiring themselves in black. They assemble at the Imambaras for Majlis (congregations) where

Sadar Imambara, Jaunpur.



Marsiya (elegies) on the tragic martyrdom of Imam Hasan and Imam Hussain are recited in prose and poetry.

The month of Muharram revives the memory of the battle of Karbala fought between the forces of Yazid and Imam Hussain. The succession of Yazid as the Khalifa of the Muslims was challenged by Imam Hussain who refused to submit to his authority, which would tantamount to acquiescence in the abominations let loose during his reign. Yazid on the other hand demanded Bait (total submission). Imam Hussain with his band of 72 fought to the bitter end. Finally the Imam was slaughtered and his head, transfixed on a spear, was carried to Damascus.

Shias in particular perform Matam (beating their chest), recite Marsiyas and shed their blood by inflicting knife wounds. Processions are taken out with Tazias (huge bamboo structures decorated with paper and tinsel representing Imam Hussain's mausoleum) and Alams (replicas of the ensign of Imam Hussain during the battle of Karbala). Taimur is believed to be the founder of the Tazia ceremony. As a devotion to Imam Hussain he erected the first Tazia and carried it on his military

pursuits. Gradually the Mughals, though they were not Shias, perfected and promoted this art.

The pivotal point for the Muharram activities is the Imambara, literally "enclosure of the Imams". In India Imambaras or Ashurkhanas are more prominent in places patronized by the Shias. The earliest kingdom to declare Shiaism as state religion was Bijapur, followed by the Qutb Shahis of Golconda. The ancestors of Wajid Ali Shah or the rulers of Lucknow and some of the nawabs of Bengal were devoted Shias who observed Muharram with due sanctity.

Mohammad Quli Qutb Shah, the founder of Hyderabad, was a keen composer of Marsiyas in Deccani Urdu. Alams during the Qutb Shahi rule were made out of gold and silver with jewels studded in them. As they symbolised the martyrs of Karbala, royal privileges like armed escorts, naqqarkhana and chattar were accorded to them. Little remains of the numerous Ashurkhanas that once dotted the Deccani Kingdom. One of the best preserved is the Badshahi Ashurkhana, not far from Hyderabad's world-famous monument Charminar. It was erected soon after the completion of Charminar in 1592. This Ashurkhana has an impressive height and is noted for its profusion of Chinese tiles. Once it boasted of 14 gold Alams and 10,000 lamps that spoke of the grandeur of the Sultan. With the fall of the Qutb Shahis, the Alams vanished and so did the countless lamps. In fact, the Ashurkhana was converted into a prison camp by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. However, during the Asaf Jahi period efforts were made to revive the glory by introducing new Alams and European lamps.

Most of the Ashurkhanas of Hyderabad are gifted with proud historic Alams or some piece of memorabilia. Koh-e-Moula Ali on the hillocks of Secunderabad is reputed for its Nishan (hand impression of Hazrat Ali); others



Top left: Gateway to the Sibtainabad Imambara, Calcutta. Left below: Hoogly Imambara, Calcutta. Above: Badshahi Ashurkhana, Hyderabad.



Chota Imambara (above), and Gateway to the Bara Imambara, both Lucknow (facing page)

have preserved the historic swords, fragments of the armour cap, etc. One such proud possession is Hazrat Fatima's chaddor. The box in which this relic is kept bears the seal of several emperors. Hazrat Fatima was the daughter of Prophet Muhammad and one of the Alams in Hyderabad was made out of the wood from the bed on which her funerary bath was performed.

Oudh was another Nawabi kingdom with Lucknow as the capital where numerous Imambaras mushroomed under different nawabs. There hardly used to be any mohalla in Lucknow that did not boast of a couple of Imambaras. The three best known Imambaras of the city - the Asafi or Bara Imambara in the old city, the Chota Imambara in Hussainabad and the Shah Najaf Imambara near Hazratganj - are famous for their architectural beauty and European chandeliers.

The Asafi Imambara was undertaken in 1748 with a view to provide relief to people from a

severe famine. The basement of this Imambara is now closed as no one is sure about the utility of the dark rooms where it is easy to get lost. This Imambara is an architectural feat, considering the fact that it is the largest vaulted hall in the world. It requires merit to build a 50 -feet high roof, spanning 162 feet in length and 53 feet in breadth, without a single beam. In fact, Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah had made it a point that his architecture should be original in conception. From the terrace at the top one can have a fine view of the city with a striking skyline. Adjoining the Imambara is the mosque and on the other end are the tombs of the nawab and of his begum.

Chota Imambara, not far from the Bara Imambara, was the work play of the third king of Oudh, Nawab Muhammad Ali. Between the Imambara and the gateway is a large courtyard with a rectangular raised tank spanned by a bridge. Within the Imambara is the burial place of the king and on the sides of the courtyard are buried his daughter and son-in-law. This



edifice is noted for its golden dome, calligraphy at the arched entrance, exquisite chandeliers, huge mirrors, silver pulpit and of course a very colourful interior.

Shah Najaf Imambara entombs the first king of Oudh, Ghaziuddin Haider, together with his three wives. The Imambara, resembling the tomb of Hazrat Ali ata Najf (Iraq), is a huge masonry structure with a large dome having an equally impressive interior replete with various chandeliers and mirror work.

On the eastern front there are three grand Imambaras worth visiting. An extension of the Nawabi Lucknow concluded at Metiaburj in Calcutta where the last of Nawabs, Wajid Ali Shah, was laid to rest within the Sibtainabad Imambara built in 1864. The imposing gateway with double mermaids - the emblem of the royal family - lies across the busy road. The building evokes memories of happier times when flowering plants and fountains almost recreated a mini Lucknow. Not far from Calcutta is Hoogly

where Hajee Mohammad Mohsin's Imambara is a landmark. Hundreds of European chandeliers reflecting on the Italian marble speak for themselves. The inside walls of the Imambara are profusely worked upon with inscriptions from the Holy Quran. The sun dial and the mighty clock from Black & Murray, London, have tall tales to tell. One has to climb to see the three enormous iron bells of the clock together with a room full of machinery. The spacious courtyard, gilded doors, water tanks with goldfish add to the beauty of the scenic Imambara. The backyard wall of this building is inscribed with the fairly long will (dated 1806 A.D) of Hajee Mohammad Mohsin who dedicated this grand Imambara, besides schools and hospitals, for the needy.

Murshidabad, along the Bangladesh border, houses the world's biggest Imambara rebuilt in 1848 at a cost of 600,000 Rupees in those times. The new building was erected when the old one caught fire during a party organised for the Europeans. In front of the

Imambara is the old Medina which is filled up to a depth of six feet with earth brought over from Mecca. The Imambara in its hey days stocked hundreds of Alams and other relics, besides chandeliers, lamps, girandoles and other means of illumination. When the relationship between the nawab and the English took a bitter turn, the Begums melted their jewellery to create the new Alams.

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