



HISTORY & HERITAGE
BY ALI HAMID KHAN



Iconic imambaras: The holy shrines of shia muslims

History reveals the development of civilisations and societies; the progress and changes in different aspects of man's life. It helps us to discover how languages developed and how cultures evolved and countries changed and different milestones achieved in political, social, scientific spheres; and about war and peace and different forms of governments. The development of imambara is a part of history of the sub-continent and beyond, the Middle Eastern countries.

Many, though not everyone, is acquainted with the word imambara. It is an Urdu/Persian word associated with a building hosting the programmes and rituals of Moharram. It is a place where people congregate and observe the programmes and commemorate the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain and his kith and kin.

Apart from the month of Moharram, people also assemble here on special dates throughout the year and programmes are held where religious scholars and Moulanas speak and narrate the tragedy of Karbala and the battles which were fought on its plains by the bank of the river, Euphrates. They also give lectures on the Quran, the life of the Holy Prophet of Islam and the history of Islam since its inception. They explain the tenets of Islam and how to practice and follow its teachings.



Imambara is pivotal in the daily life of the shias, especially during dates pertaining to events that are part of Islamic history. Imambara is decorated with *alams*, which are banners and Islamic standards reminiscent of the forces of Imam Hussain when they confronted the soldiers of the junta. There are *tazias* displayed which are replicas of Imam's mausoleum at Karbala. Food and other edible items are distributed

after majlises (religious deliberations and discourses) to the attendees.

On special dates, the congregation are treated to full meals inside the imambara when they sit and eat together, all attendees sitting shoulder to shoulder. Programmes go on late into the nights as processions are also held on some special occasions.

Imambaras are spread across the globe. In Iran and Iraq, imambara is



called Hussainya, while in Pakistan, it is sometimes called imambargah. The history of imambara dates back to the time when the Imam's remaining members after the massacre at Karbala were released from prison in Damascus and wanted to hold a meeting to mourn their deads.

They took a house and invited their followers and sympathisers and narrated in detail the event of Karbala. As time passed, it developed and took more elaborate and majestic shape, size, and form. It peaked during the time of Safavids in Iran and during the time of Ali Verdi Khan, Nawab Sirajudowla, the later Najifi dynasty of Bengal, and the Nawab of Awadh — Nawab Asifuddowla, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his other predecessors Nawab Muhammad Ali Shah and Nawab Amjad Ali Shah; Nawab of Rampur, Nawab of Patna, and Salarjung of Hyderabad.