

# Uncovering the Forgotten Legacy of Dar al-Shifa Hospital in Hyderabad, India

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**Abstract.** Dar al-Shifa, “house of healing”, is a 16th-century Maristan that stands in ruins today in Hyderabad, one of the most populous cities of India. It was built on the banks of the Musi River and was surrounded by happening marketplaces of its time, such as the famous Bazar-e-Noorul Mara. Interestingly, this historical Maristan was built by the city’s founder, Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah, an emperor of the Persian Qutub Shahi dynasty in 1595, only four years after the city was established. The city’s first double-storied hospital also consisted of a mosque and a medical college for students to study different medical disorders and research appropriate treatment plans, particularly in the light of Unani medicine. Dar al-Shifa was home to many notable physicians, including the renowned physician Shamsuddin bin Nooruddin who authored *Zubdat ul-Hikam*, a Persian medical treatise on hygiene and preventative healthcare measures for attaining wellness. With the decline of the Qutub Shahi dynasty, mismanagement of Waqf finances, and encroachment by locals, gradually much of the hospital was destroyed, except a few arches. This paper presents a historical perspective on the origin of Dar al-Shifa, its medicinal practices, and contributions to modern healthcare. Through analyzing scholarly accounts, architectural remnants, and the last surviving manuscript of a royal physician in Dar al-Shifa, I aim to highlight the legacy of Dar al-Shifa in the rich Islamic intellectual heritage of ancient India.

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## Uncovering the Forgotten Legacy of Dar al-Shifa Hospital in Hyderabad, India

For centuries, the glorious Maristan of Dar al-Shifa has been under the rubble in the city of Hyderabad, India. Once thought to be the largest hospital in South Asia, its distant memories have been the subject of many old legends in every Hyderabadi household. Dar al-Shifa, literally translated as “house of cure” in both Arabic and Persian, was commissioned by Sultan Muhammed Quli Qutub Shah in 1595, the fifth sultan of the Persian origin Quli Qutub Shahi dynasty. The two-storeyed hospital was built to treat the ill, only four years after the capital was shifted from Golconda to the new city of Hyderabad. It is said that the Sultan made the following prayer before the inception of Hyderabad and Dar al-Shifa, which perhaps points to his lifelong commitment to societal welfare: “Oh God, make my city full of people like You keep the river full of fish” (Husain, 1996, p. 4).

Dar al-Shifa is built on the banks of the Musi River, right in the heart of the old city of Hyderabad. Its strategic location (see Figure 1) across important state buildings and the river may have been intentionally picked to facilitate easy accessibility for the travellers coming from afar and for patients to enjoy the fresh air and scenic views of the city of Hyderabad. According to Sibghatullah Khan (personal communication, November 1, 2023), an architect and an oral historian, Dar al-Shifa functioned as a full-fledged hospital and contained a massive courtyard, an

outpatient clinic, patient admission rooms, separate rooms for doctors to stay, a hammam, a quarantine ward on the ground floor exclusively used to control plague outbreaks, and a traveller's lodge, i.e., Sarai. The Sarai housed the patients who were on a waiting list until they could be admitted inside (Sherwani, 1996, p. 31). Inside the 25000 square feet campus, one can also find ruins of an unani medical college, and a mosque built for the physicians, patients, and their families to pray (Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 54). Inside Dar al-Shifa, there were eight double rooms on each floor towards the north and twelve double rooms on each floor towards the south, and each room could accommodate up to four beds (Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 53). Unlike other buildings of public utility, some historians argue that the overall design of the Maristan is 'secular' (Sherwani, 1996, p. 31), as opposed to the predominant Indo-Islamic architecture from that period, reflecting an inclusive space to welcome individuals of all faiths for medical treatments.

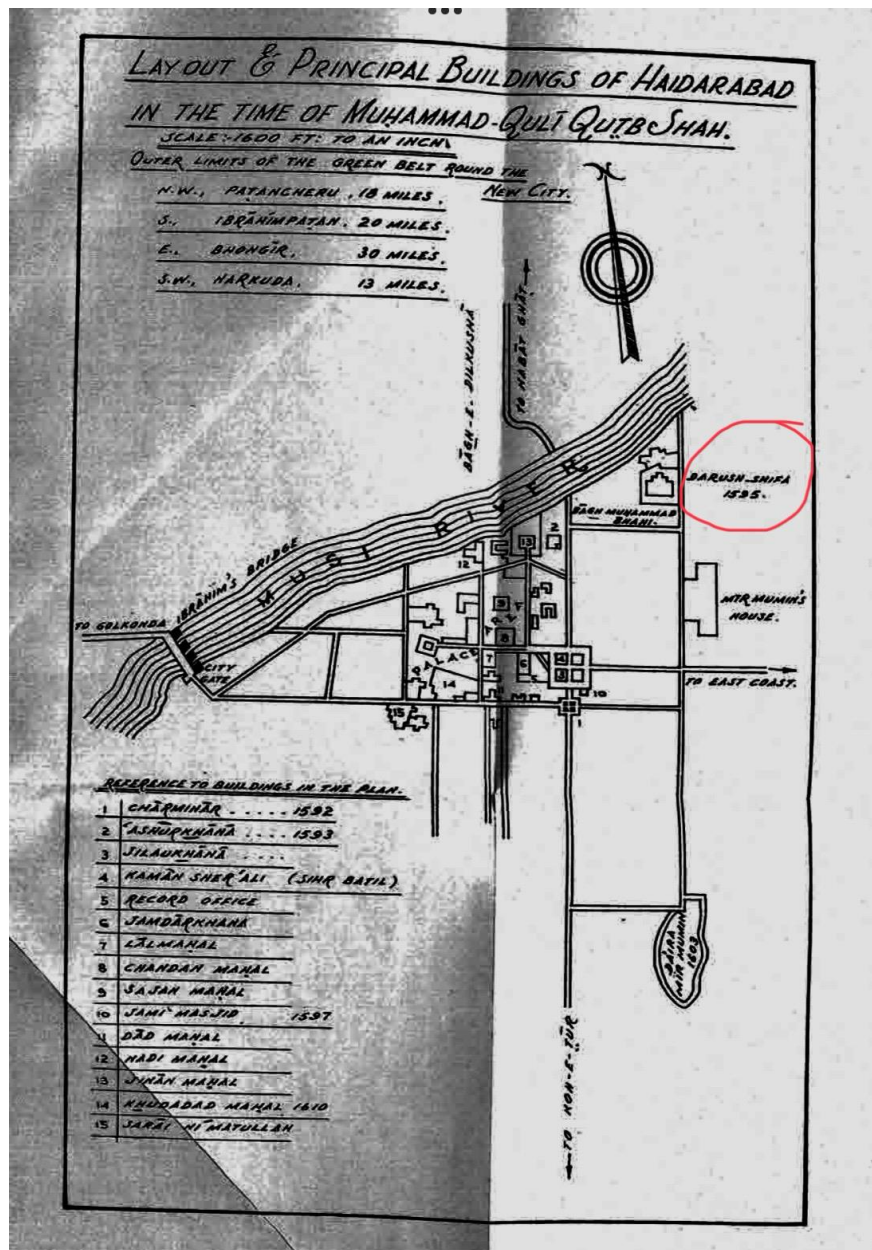


Figure 1: A map of the Dar al-Shifa. From Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah, Founder of Haidarabad (p. 30), by Haroon Sherwani 1967, Hyderabad: Sahitya Akademi.

### **Facilities and Contributions of Physicians at Dar al-Shifa**

Inside Dar al-Shifa, all patients enjoyed free lodging, food, and high-quality treatment sponsored by the state (Rizvi, 2017, as cited in Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 53). In fact, much of the Hyderabad food cuisine and culture is largely influenced by Unani medicine from the Qutub Shahi period, such as the consumption of Biryani with Burani (curd mixed with onions and herbs) until today, as it was believed to be a 'healthy food combination' prescribed by the physicians to improve brain health and prevent constipation (Roger, 1991, p. 23-24). According to city historians, patients were also given special herbal baths in the hammams for treating certain diseases. Unlike current healthcare practices, the physicians of Dar al-Shifa took both preventive and holistic approaches to healing and were inspired by the works of their predecessors like Ibn Sina and Ar-Razi.

### **Physicians of Dar al-Shifa**

The economic prosperity of the Shiite Qutub Shahi kingdom and their love for poetry and medicine, attracted the migration of renowned intellectuals, poets, and physicians, particularly from Iran to work, so much so that the Deccan empire of the Qutub Shahi was considered to be superior to its then contemporary, the Safavids of Iran (Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 51). Due to a lack of social justice and security in Iran, many physicians preferred to migrate to Hyderabad (Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 52). The physicians of Dar al-Shifa were well supported and received handsome honorariums through the court (Gilani, 2012, as cited in Mousavi et al. 2021, p.53). Additionally, they were tasked with the responsibility to train the next generation of physicians inside the hospital's medical college. Medical students received scholarships from the government to study "and were assured employment after they had taken their medical degrees" (Sherwani, 1996, p. 31). Given the incredible reputation of the medical college in Dar al-Shifa, talented physicians from Greece, Italy, and Iran were also reported to have immigrated to Hyderabad (Mousavi et al. 2021, p. 53).

Some prominent physicians of Dar al-Shifa who also wrote remarkable medical treatises include Abdullah bin Yazadani's *Tibb-e-Faridi*, Taqiuddin Mohammed Bin Sadruddin's *Mizan ut-Taba-e-Qutub Shahi*, and Shamsuddin bin Nooruddin's *Zubdat ul-Hikam* (Ali and Hussain, 1990, p. 52-54). A copy of *Tibb-e-Faridi* was digitally published by the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library recently in Tamil Nadu, India. The manuscript was written in simple Persian script as a medical manual for everyday domestic use to benefit from (Ali and Hussain, 1990, p. 54) and contains chapters for treating epilepsy, tremors, muscle spasms, love sickness and obsessive thoughts with compound herbal medicines.

Unfortunately, many such Persian medical manuscripts have been lost over time and none of the patient case studies from Dar al-Shifa survive today. These medical manuscripts, particularly *Zubdat ul-Hikam*, give a glimpse of the holistic therapeutic modalities employed by the physicians of Dar al-Shifa for treating different somatic and psychological illnesses.

### **Medical Manuscript from Dar al-Shifa: *Zubdat-ul-Hikam***

One of the last surviving medical manuscripts from Dar al-Shifa, *Zubdat ul-Hikam* was dedicated by Shamsuddin bin Nooruddin to Sultan Mohammed Quli Qutub Shah (Ali and Hussain, 1990, p. 52). The manuscript begins with the author praising Allah and recognising that healing and wisdom ultimately comes from Allah. *Zubdat-ul-Hikam* focuses on promoting hygiene and employing preventative measures for the maintenance of health (Ali and Hussain, 1990, p. 52). It

is divided into four discourses, contains 36 chapters, and is only 25 pages long. Preserved in the Salar Jung Museum Library of Hyderabad, India, it outlines the health precautions to be undertaken in different seasons and the importance of nutrition and exercise in improving the health of the heart, mind, sex organs, and gut (Ali and Hussain, p. 52). Though much of the manuscript is based on the Greek humeral theory, certain healthcare measures suggested by the author continue to be relevant even today. While translating the manuscript, I came across many chapters that discuss mental health.

In chapter four of the third discourse that discusses managing health through resting and regulation of mental activity, Nooruddin (n.d.) believes that balance of mental states is critical to attaining good health. He argues that moderate joy increases blood circulation, invigorates the body, and fosters overall well-being. However, sudden joy, if immoderate, can lead to abandoning health precautions and potentially cause health scares. He accurately hints at the detrimental impact of strong emotions, such as grief, on the health of the body and mind.

In chapter seven of the third discourse, Nooruddin (n.d.) explains that the mind is the leader of the body, and that the wellness of the body depends on the wellness of the mind. It is unclear if the author was making a reference to the corporeal or the incorporeal meaning, nevertheless, it is reminiscent of the current understanding of the mind-body connection in both Western psychology as well as Islamic psychology. Furthermore, Nooruddin (n.d.) advises the readers to preserve their psychological health by regulating complex emotions like anger, refraining from ostentation, finding pleasure in the company of friends, listening to pleasant tales, and consuming sour wine, orange-flavoured barley and cumin. Although his dietary prescription for improving mental health can't be scientifically established today, his other suggestions such as the importance of a good social support system to improve mental health remain relevant in modern psychology.

Finally, in chapter twelve of the fourth discourse, Nooruddin (n.d.) recommends different natural scents for treating different diseases that may have been prescribed as part of aromatherapy treatments in Dar al-Shifa and suggests mixing the fragrance of violet with cloves to cleanse the brain, relieve headaches, and cure dizziness.

### **Reasons for Decline and Current State**

It is unclear when and under what circumstances did Dar al-Shifa begin to collapse. However, most historians assume that it began with the siege of Golconda by Emperor Aurangzeb in 1687 (Richards, 2008). Since the capital was shifted from Hyderabad to Aurangabad, this may have led to the absence of adequate funding for the hospital operations (Khan, S., personal communication, November 1, 2023). Dar al-Shifa finally fell into ruins after the establishment of new super-speciality hospitals in the city (Ifthekhar, 2019). Today, Dar al-Shifa lies in a dilapidated state and only one of the arched halls remains. The large courtyards and halls have fallen prey to land encroachments by the locals and no attention is paid by the government for its preservation.



Figure 2: Portrait of Dar al-Shifa from a recent trip.



Figure 3: Portrait of a courtyard inside Dar al-Shifa.

## Conclusion

Throughout the paper, the contributions of Dar al-Shifa to healthcare were highlighted. The maristan of Dar al-Shifa was a holistic healing home for the ill. The inhabitants of this vast healing home received free individualized care from the physicians sponsored by the state. In return for their service to the citizens, the physicians of Dar al-Shifa received valuable gifts and honours from the Sultans. It is impossible to envision such an infrastructure and approach in modern-day hospitals that are burdened with increased reports of burnout in healthcare workers and medical negligence in patients. Perhaps the legacy of Dar al-Shifa is a reminder of our rich intellectual Muslim heritage of the past that still longs to be rediscovered. Allah knows best.

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