

Art
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Celebrations and drums go together

MAQBOOL Ahmed, 24, has been a drummer for the last five years. Clad in a saffron uniform particular to most in his profession, he squats with his four group mates on the roundabout of a busy crossing in Lahore. With their drums lying on the ruthlessly trampled turf in front of them, two of them are dozing off, apparently with ennui. Or perhaps, with exhaustion. This is 8 o'clock in the evening and they are all hoping to be hired to enliven with energetic drum beats the joyful occasions being celebrated in the city.

"There is nothing we can do, except waiting for someone who might require our services," says Maqbool. He is one of the hundreds of drummers who come to Lahore from various smaller districts and villages, some in the suburbs of Lahore and some quite far away.

"We can only find some money in big cities like Lahore, where people have a lot to spare and spend when it comes to celebrating some big occasion," says Maqsood, who comes from Narang Mandi, at least a two-hour drive from Lahore.

Until three or four years ago, drummers were hardly ever seen sitting or roaming on the streets and bazaars of Lahore, or of any other city for that matter. They

were pretty much confined (and content) to playing their instrument for the bhag-consuming and filth-covered 'faqirs' and 'derveshs', who would dance as if in devotional ecstasy, at the tombs of sufis and saints.

Not long ago, it was mostly in melas and various *Urs* celebrations of the saints where the drummers could display their skills in beating the drums and make some money at the same time. But it has almost become a fashion now to call the drummers at functions and cultural events like Basant. Affluent and enthusiastic kite-fliers take them to their rooftops to have *paichas* on the beat of ear-piercing drums.

Life for these drummers is really tough. Most of them can afford a little bit of sleep only when they are travelling. No wonder they prefer to travel by train. Often they don't finish till about 2am, especially when it is a marriage function. Being unable to stay even in cheap hotels (as this would gobble up most of their hard-earned money), they have no choice but to sleep on footpaths, in parks or in some corner around the Lahore railway station. Even in the foggy and biting cold weather they have to make do with whatever tattered pieces

of shawls they have with them. They are up with the lark to catch the early morning train back to their places.

Most of them prefer returning to their native places, though it involves a great deal of physical stress, and also money to pay the

fares.

"I must get back to my town every morning because I work as a salesman in a small general store there during the day," says Ashraf Jehangir, who comes from Pindi Bhattian, at least one and a half hour's drive from Lahore.

"I have to work overtime because I am trying to save money to do some computer courses," he says.

Whether Ashraf, currently trying to do his matriculation privately, will ever be able to save enough money for computer

courses is anybody's guess.

Most of drummers work in groups and have to divide the sum of money earned equally among four to six members. They don't normally get more than four or five hundred rupees for any particular function. Even though they manage to make some extra money through 'vayls' (gift money?) showered on them by the merry-making cousins, friends and relatives of the bride or the bridegroom, this is not enough to enable significant savings after meeting their daily needs.

It is pertinent to note that not all drummers play their instruments really well. Some of them are novices in this profession and can only play with the support of the other members of the group. But any opportunity given to them actually serves as a good learning experience for them. Some others, however, have little control over different beats and are often struggling to maintain the rhythm. Drum is normally played on a very basic four-beat rhythm, which is quite easy for anyone to play. It is, however, not easy for everyone to get the feel of the moment and change the mood and the tempo of the beats accordingly.

Having spoken to a number of drummers this writer discovered



that quite a few of them have sensed 'great' money-making opportunities in the people's growing tendency to celebrate certain occasions with a lot of pump and show. This is why, perhaps, there is an ever-increasing number of newcomers in this profession, who are still in the learning process and can hardly impress anyone with their raw skills. But whoever cares for refinement in the heat of frenzied celebration!

It is rare not to see *bhangra* or some other traditional dance being performed by someone wherever drums are being beaten. For most fun lovers and the followers of Dionysus, who are in no small number here (however squeamish and prudish we may choose to be), the beat and the sound of a drum are irresistible. Frantic *dhammal* and a weird *bhangra* style are not to be missed on the occasions.

It is indeed remarkable that despite the profusion of sophisticated modern musical instruments, drum has not lost its appeal and vitality. There is a tremendously powerful rustic touch in the beating of drum which can evoke and inexplicably profound response. The value of drummers, therefore, seems to be eternal.—**IMRAN MUNIR AWAN**