**A town like Bhera**

Erum Ashfaq

Monday, Nov 15, 2021

The writer is a Lahore-based urban planner, economist and artist.

A silence that prevails in the quietness of abandoned mansions, with doors that still wait for loved ones to revert back, the nostalgia of times gone by that wander in the streets. This is the town of Bhera.

Ever since the motorway between Lahore and Islamabad was constructed, Bhera remains the most favoured midway stopover. This was my only impression about this small town until the day I visited Bhera, for some official duty, that ultimately changed my view forever.

Bhera is a hidden and unexplored gem of Punjab because of its historic value. It flourished on the crossroads of history and gradually lost its importance, a fading abode with crumbling structures and lost streets.

I was working on a project regarding the small towns of Punjab. My visit to Bhera was scheduled to assess the fabric of the infrastructure of the town. For this I had to move along the streets and alleys guided by the municipal administration staff along with our team. Since the officials were locals of the town, a lot of valued and interesting information was revealed by them about the town.

During my short visit, the solitude of the town stimulated my creative thoughts. The doors of most of the elegant mansions were locked permanently in an endless wait. It was a town waiting like sleeping beauty for someone to come and wake it up by a tender act of love. I was deeply moved and when I got back, I started looking for information related to the town of Bhera.

My initial skimming told me the town was at the epitome of civilisation in its time. It was home to artisans and craftsmen. During the English period, Bhera was so renowned for wood carving that carpenters from here were taken to England to carve some of the doors of the royal palace. I dug more into history and found that the town dates back to 400 BC. It was a flourishing kingdom encompassing the valley of Kashmir and the Punjab highland. During the Mughal period, caravans from Central Asia, Kabul, Qandahar and Peshawar used to cross the river to go to Lahore, Delhi and other parts of India. Caravans from Kashmir used to reach Bhera along the river Bhera. It was the thoroughfare of every invading army.

The town of Bhera had been a settlement from the times of Alexander the Great, but with the passage of time lost its identity. Bhera some 1300 years ago was a place of learning and people from other areas came here to learn about medicine and geography. During the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar, Bhera had a royal mint for minting gold and silver coins. Sher Shah Suri rebuilt the town in the 15th century; a mosque still stands there with three onion-shaped domes.

In line with the practices of its times, Bhera was structured as a walled city with eight city gates. The wall is now gone and so are most of the gates. A few gates exist now, a few have been reconstructed – but with extreme lack of professionalism.

The town’s civilisation manifested not only in its physical outlook but also in its cultural traits. Bhera remained a symbol of religious harmony in its most glorified times. A number of architectural masterpieces still exist in every street of the town, belonging either to Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs. There are many historical mosques in Bhera town out of which the mosques of Tughlaq, Khilji and Suri periods are quite prominent.

There are about eight temples in different mohallas of Bhera, of which three have almost been leveled to the ground whereas the others are also in a crumbling condition. Apart from Hindu temples, there are also gurdwaras and a Jain temple in Bhera, all of which have lost their original beauty. The Jain temple is noted for beautiful woodwork which has deteriorated now. The paintings that once decorated the interior and exterior of the temple have also disappeared now.

There is neglect of such heritage sites especially in small towns that lag behind in infrastructure, conservation and tourism. The town today sits distressed and largely forgotten.

It is time for Pakistan, Punjab in particular, to reinvent the potentials of small towns and rejuvenate their untapped resources. History is a manifestation of romance. In this connection some recommendations were crafted to sensitise the authorities to develop a vision.

To start with, the gates and withered-away wall of the town should be marked and rebuilt; the design should necessarily reflect the glorious past of civilisation of Bhera in the first place. Next the important streets and bazaars should be brick-soled along with comprehensive management of solid waste. We cannot expect a heritage tourist site with garbage scattered everywhere. This component of rehabilitation sites is mostly overlooked in our country. Next, the history and name of each mohallah should be labelled on boards. This is the basic frame which is needed to be established in the preliminary phase.

In addition to this, the town boasts many remarkable old buildings, noticeable for their impressive embellishments. One comes across impressive havelis with ornate carved wooden doors, splendid jharokhas and balconies. Walking in the streets of Bhera opens the visitor to the rich past vista of this settlement.

Accessibility to such sites remains central for developing them. It is so fortunate that the town is extremely accessible and easily connected. Moving forward, the area needs to be rejuvenated, utilising existing buildings as the anchoring catalysts. The doors, jharokas, balconies and architectural facades of havelis and mansions should be revamped. A main artery or street with some major businesses along its either sides should be repaired, brick-soled and refurbished to make the walk or drive appealing to both residents and passersby heading through the town. Illuminate these streets with appropriate lighting to make the district highly appealing at night too.

Moreover, such picturesque small towns offer peace and a rustic or peaceful atmosphere for big-city tourists. The urban tourist is ready to pay for a day out in a heritage, value added and traditional setting. They are ready to pay more for an environment that connects them to the past, away from the hustle and bustle of contemporary life.

To increase the mobility of visitors, transforming the dreary main street into a fashionable district with a cafe, an art gallery, a picture or painting wall with traditional artifact shops or other businesses that encourage socialising will bring tourists as well as locals to the downtown area and increase local opportunities of employment and revenue.

Such businesses, though they seem very rudimentary, have a great impact on the holistic impact of an economic revolution. Investing in the cottage industry remains central for bringing a change in our economic structure. Cultural heritage itself has an essential engine for economic development and growth.

The possibility to generate income from cultural assets creates interesting and deep-rooted opportunities for people at the grassroots level. It gives impetus to mud pottery, rugs and art crafts, the brick-kiln industry, local paints, masonry, carpentry, food supply chains, poultry, transportation and uncountable complementary businesses. Such transformation of sites would increase the aggregate demand and consequently the increased revenue of small enterprises would increase the aggregate supply. This will have a positive impact on employment, reduction in poverty, and increase in private enterprise.

Such policies are highly favourable for a country like Pakistan with low level of literacy, less employment opportunities and where financial institutions are not very much functional to provide funds for enterprise. In this scenario, it is highly recommended to devise policies that support labour-intensive content. Cultural industries also promote entrepreneurial values and, due to their modest capital and less infrastructure requirements, grow quickly – which contributes to structural and geographic balance.

Parallel to our economic factor, we have to cherish historic wonders, cherish natural endowments and preserve them as a sacred entity for our children and our children’s children. We cannot let selfishness or greedy interests rob our country of its beauty, its riches or its romance. The mission is to leave a better world than what we inherited.

Email: erumashfaq52@yahoo.com