

Business is business and a cup of tea was a cup of tea

By Mahmood Zaman

Lahore

For many years I accompanied Prof Abdus Saboor Qureshi, the head of Dayal Singh College's history department, on his Sunday book searches that would end with us having tea at the Cheney's Lunch Home on The Mall close to the Anarkali Bazaar.

I am talking of the 1960s. Both of us

lived inside Yakki Gate and used to take a tonga from Delhi Gate to Lohari Gate at two annas per person. From there we would walk through the Anarkali Bazaar, spending hours looking for books on history and literature in the pile spread on the footpath opposite the Bible Society. As we retired to the Cheney's we invariably ran into political activists, lawyers and

writers discussing and debating everything and anything under the sun. This exchange of views often led to a commotion and the air inside the restaurant was filled with all kinds of noises from hoarse laughter to cries of agony to shouts that demanded silence.

Cheney's Lunch Home was certainly not the favourite place for men of letters and canvas. There were other restaurants and teahouses not far off where a number of them used to sit in groups, sipping tea and exchanging views. They always made their presence felt by stuffing the small space inside a restaurant with cigarette smoke and loud, arguing voices.

Starting from the Lower Mall side, the first restaurant was Kim's near the museum where students of the National College of Arts (then Mayo School of Arts) and museum visitors came for refreshments. A little further, there was a restaurant at Tollinton Market which later came to be known as Capri. This was the place where the Punjab University students and teachers, lawyers and traders who had their businesses nearby had their lunches and snacks; but Capri's specialty was its cold coffee.

A little further on The Mall towards the

YMCA Hall, on the left was the Cheney's Lunch Home which served good food. Almost adjacent to that was the Coffee House which used to be the India Coffee House before partition. Restaurants of the same name were also in business in Karachi and Delhi. This was one of the major centres where writers and journalists got together and sat for hours. Noted journalist I A Rehman says that Maulana Charagh Hasan Hasrat and Majeed Nizami were Coffee House regulars. Those

who came here occasionally included Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mian Iftikharuddin,

Mohammad Tufail and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi. It was a favourite forum for the two Abdullahs — Butt and Malik — to share their jokes with the audience.

Hosh Tirmizi writes in Naqoosh's Lahore Number that the first place on record to have hosted a 'baithak' (sitting) of writers in 20th century Lahore was Shafi's inn inside the Delhi Muslim Hotel in Anarkali Bazaar. Around 1918 Bedil Shahjahanpuri started living here after his appointment as the editor of literary journal Makhzan. Eminent writers such as Patras Bokhari, Maulana Abdul Majeed Salik and

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PAK Tea House — once a centre for intellectuals. — File photo

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Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj visited him frequently and thus formed a group.

Nagina Bakery near Neela Gumbad and Arab Hotel opposite the Islamia College on Railway Road were established around 1925-26 and quickly became the favourite haunts for writers, teachers, students, journalists and lawyers.

Tirmizi writes that both the restaurants attracted men of letters between 1925 and 1936, including Sahir Ludhianwi, Akhtar Sheerani, Khwaja Dil Mohammad, Dr MD Taseer, Syed Abid Ali Abid, Hafeez Jallandhari, Charagh Hasan Hasrat, Fazal Karim Durrani, Bari Aliq, Maulana Abdul Majeed Salik, Ghulam Rasool Mehr, Dr Sabir Ali, Maulana Tajwar Najeebabadi, Diwan Chand Sharma, Dr Inayatullah, Dr Syed Abdullah, Maulana Salahuddin, Prof Ilmuddin Salik, Dr Ashiq Batalvi, Aqa Bedar Bakht, Shorish Kashmiri, Maulvi Nazir Ahmad, Maulana Waris Kamal and Gopal Mittal.

According to the same writer, the Coffee House, which was Indian Coffee House before partition, bore the prefix of Zellins (or Zellin's) for some time. Kanhayya Lal Kapoor, Devander Satyarthi, Sheikh Hassamuddin, Bari Aliq, Abdullah Butt and Malik Aslam Hayat were its regular visitors. After partition, Syed Sibte Hasan, Nasir Kazmi, Riaz Qadir and painter Shakir Ali were among those who had their sittings here.

Hosh Tirmizi writes that the Pak Tea House, which was India Tea House before partition, became the centre of intellectuals soon after Pakistan came into being because it sold the cheapest tea at that time. Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Ihsan Danish, Intizar Husain, Nasir Kazmi, Shohrat Bokhari, Anjum Roomani,

Qayyum Nazar, Yousuf Jamal, Sajjad Baqar Rizvi, Ejaz Batalvi, Sher Mohammad Akhtar, Riaz Ahmad, Munir Niazi, Omar Faizi, Shehzad Ahmad, Shad Amritsari, Mohamamd Tufail, Arif Abdul Mateen and Zaheer Kashmiri were its regular visitors.

Other writers and poets would join them after the weekly meetings of the Anjuman Taraqi Pasand Musanifeen and the Halqa-i-Arbab-i-Zauq at the YMCA on Sundays. They included Syed Abid Ali Abid, Syed Waqar Azeem, Dr Wazir Agha, Dr Syed Abdullah, Maulana Salahuddin, Dr Nazeer Ahmad, Dr Waheed Qureshi, Iftikhar Jalib, Mashkoor Husain Yad, Jilani Kamran, Ahmad Mushtaq and several others. I A Rehman says that many of the writers also visited the YMCA restaurant which was primarily meant to cater to students and residents of the YMCA hostel.

Starting from the Charing Cross side of The Mall, Nedous Hotel stood where Avari is now located. This hotel also had a bar and a dance floor. Adjacent to that was the Stiffles Hotel, where Wapda House is now located. Stiffles had a bar and dance floor. Visitors could also sit on grassy plots of the hotel for tea and other drinks. The first Lahore Press Club was also located on the upper portion of this hotel. On one side were four shops and one of them sold liquor.

When the construction of the Wapda House started, Stiffles was shifted to the place where Shahnawaz Autos is now situated. The management later changed the hotel's name to Argentina and it was there until the mid 1960s, when another restaurant, Mall Luxury, was established at the place. It looked like a makeshift eatery because of its cardboard walls and cabins. The Mall Luxury served soft and hard drinks and snacks to its customers until its

closure in the early 1970s.

Lorangs Hotel in the Shah Din Building served soft and hard drinks and also food. Faletti's, some 200 yards away from it, also had a bar and a dance floor but it was expensive. There was a small restaurant on the other side of The Mall exactly opposite the Mall Luxury hotel. It was called Chalet and comprised a single first-floor room. Chalet's ground floor had the reception and kitchen. A garments shop has now been established here.

Noted journalist, columnist and the secretary-general of the newly restored Anjuman Taraqi Pasand Musanifeen (Progressive Writers Association) Hameed Akhtar is reminded of the Metro restaurant of pre-partition days. Metro, famous for its cabarets, was there for some years after 1947. It was situated at the place where Wapda House is now located and must have been a forerunner of Stiffles.

Mr Akhtar says that the restaurant that became very popular was Lord's where political activists used to sit for hours along with lawyers and journalists. Political parties also held news conferences at this hotel which was located where Naqi Market is now situated. He recalls that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Lord's a couple of times when he had just founded the Pakistan People's Party in 1967. But Bhutto's most memorable visit to this hotel was in 1971 when he had just taken over power. Bhutto came to Lahore soon after he assumed the office of the president. He went to seek Data Ganj Bukhsh's blessings and when he was returning to the Governor's House along with Malik Ghulam Mustafa Khar, the then Punjab governor, he asked the driver to stop over in front of Lord's where he spent some time meeting old acquaintances.

Opposite Lord's on the other bank of

The Mall adjacent to Beadon Road, was Shezan restaurant. Shoe shops are now located here. Another Shezan branch situated at the Dyal Singh Mansion was completely burnt in the Feb 14, 2006 protests over the publication of offensive caricatures in the West.

According to Hameed Akhtar, both Regal and Plaza cinemas also had restaurants and bars which remained open before and after film shows. Regal in particular sold the most expensive tea in the city; at 12 annas per person while the rate at other hotels was three annas. Refills, however, were free. Nearby was the Cecil Bar and Restaurant which boasted one of the first neon signs of the city. It was run by the same management which looked after Cecil Hotel in Murree.

Adjacent to the street leading to Regal cinema was Standard Hotel; the Mirza Book Agency is located at the place now. The hotel also had a bar and offered good food. In the same street were two liquor shops where hard drinks were sold till a ban was imposed on their sale in 1977. On the other side of The Mall there was Gardenia Hotel and Restaurant which was later re-named as Salateen. Vanguard publishing house is now located here. Painter Dr Ajaz Anwar says there were actually two hotels at this spot — one was Gardenia and the other was Malabar Hotel.

These restaurants thrived in the so-called cultural capital of the country until the culture of capital started taking over in the 1970s. Where there were previously meeting points are today shopping centres. The loss is yet to be fully expressed in letters and in lines. Perhaps it can never be (fully) expressed.

The article is part of a series on Lahore to mark the 60th year of Pakistan.