**Cricket vs culture**

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| LAHORE is more than a crucible of history. It is a potpourri of culture, literature, art, music, cinema and almost everything that elevates the human spirit above its animal instincts.  This season, Lahore resonates with the sounds of creativity, showcased a few weeks ago by the fourth annual ThinkFest, this weekend by the second Lahore Biennale, and later this month by the Lahore LitFest.  Lahoris are accused ofbeinggluttons.They eat too much, too often, but it seems they never suffer from a surfeit of culture.  This Lahore Biennale could be described as a carefully assembled feast, compared to its frugal predecessor two years ago. The distinguishing ingredient this year was the curatorial role played by Sheikha Hoor al Qasimi, aided by Qudsia Rahim. Hoor al Qasimi is already familiar with the worl( of Pakistani artists here and abroad. With skill and imagination, she reversed the trend of migration by bringing a number of works by foreign artists to Lahore.  It would be ruthlessly cruel to single out any single work that deserves special mention at the cost of others, but if one had to admit a bias, it would be towards the stunning tapestry created by Khadim Ali. He is now as Australian as he was once Pakistani.  His eye-demanding tapestry is an embroldered contemporary version of Picasso`s famous mural Guernica, a soaring remonstrance against war. Khadim All uses numerous symbols of evil Chinese, Nepali, Hindu, Persian to demonstrate that evil is universal. In the bacl(ground, barely perceptible at first, one detects a recurring pattern of the outline of flying drones. It is his subtle way of reminding us that destruction and mayhem in the 20th century were not invented by the Western military machine; it has simply been perpetuated by it.  The biennale began even before it began.  Two satellite functions one an exhibition at a superbly appointed modern art gallery, and the other an enterprising cultural express for a team of high-end visiting Italian tourists served as an informal opener for the biennale itself.  Its formal inauguration was held on Jan 26 at the Hazuri Bagh where guests (art lovers, guests from abroad, ambassadors and high commissioners, even the chief guest our President Dr Arif Alvi) sat dwarfed by the majestic lofty Alamgiri Gate entrance to the Lahore Fort. Such a grand setting deserves a royalcanopy.In the absence of one, the VIP guests had to endure the broiling heat of a winter sun.  The speeches were many but mercifully short. The guests then entered the fort and toured the various installations displayed to imaginative advantage in the endless dark-ened chambers, which run beneath the upper apartments of the fort. The Mughals and the Sikhs lived in a sense above the shop; their infrastructure of courtiers crowded in the vaults below.  The Lahore Biennale cleverly used unlikely locations such as the Planetarium and Bradlaugh Hall, which are too often neglected during such festivals. Even a gallery on Bedian road, once regarded as the ultimate periphery of Lahore, found a place on the Biennale map.  One prominent display was located in the former Plaza cinema, also known as the Sagar theatre. Those who remember the cinema during the 1950s and 1960s will recall two life-size figures a medieval violinist and a guitarist occupying the alcoves above the main entrance. No one was ever likely to worship them, but some fundos had such distracting statuary removed. They have been replaced by garish images of actresses who sleep during the day.  One must confess that it was refreshing that nowhere during this first weel5 of the biennaleµt wui extena into most of February) did one hear the word `corruption` or `money-laundering`, or the `will-he-won`the?`departure ofthe Punjab chief minister.  The organisers were able to get the UAE minister of culture and knowledge development, thechairman of Sotheby`s Middle East & India, and representatives from the Aga Khan Trust to be part of the biennale. Their presence was more than a pious formality. It was, like the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in November last year, and the subsequent very positive British travel advisory, an affirmation that Pakistan is once again safe for tourists.  Initiatives such as the biennale are the brainchildren of the private sector. While government support is forthcoming (usually in kind), it merely exposes the sterility of government functionaries, those `cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat`.  Will any government, ever, put culture at a par with cricket? Probably not. Unfairly, the biennale had to compete over the same weekend with a T20 match between Pakistan and Bangladesh in Qaddafi stadium. The losing Bangladeshi cricket team should have quit play and savoured instead the success of the Lahore Biennale. The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |