

# Mourning the *sherwani*



By Ayesha Javed Akram

**A**T every turn of Anarkali bazaar, one is greeted by a slice of history. A walk down Neela Gumbad leads to Al-Karam bakery, a shop that has been serving dainty biscuits, which crumble at the slightest touch, since the time of Partition. Their menu of soft sandwiches, moist cakes and generously stuffed patties hasn't changed in the last five decades. Neither it seems have the feebly rotat-

The letterhead had the letters MAJ printed in the left corner, and the address Memdot Villas penned underneath. After usual salutations, the following paragraph had been typewritten: "I can recommend this shop without any hesitation to anyone who wants his clothes well-made." It was signed Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Nawaz holds this letter from Jinnah dear as proof of the high standards he maintains in his craftsmanship. Though the note from Memdot Villas is his most valuable possession, the stack also contained other letters with official trademarks. In 1955 and 1956, Kaporthala tailors were assigned the title of official tailors to the governor of Punjab. Another letter dated 1958, was penned by the additional general inspector of Pakistan, and reads as follows: "The proprietor is a God-fearing person of great courtesy and precision."

11.7.05 Daily Times

Fashion & Clothing



counters, or the blackened ovens. This is probably the only shop in the city where food is warmed by the heat generated from a 100-watt light bulb instead of a microwave. It is rumoured that cardboard boxes from Al-Karam made their way to Governor's House and Chief Minister's House for many years.

In the brightly-lit shop where Nawaz steadfastly clings to the relics of his family's past honour, one wall is completely taken over by a grand glass cupboard in which *sherwanis* and *achkans* have been carefully hung. In dull greys, browns, and whites, with minimal embellishments, the cupboard is a look into the past of

and Minister's House for many years.

During the days when the governor's guests would savour Al-Karam goodies, another delivery was regularly made to the Governor's House. Located a few metres away from the bakery is a narrow shop called Kaporthala tailors. It was here that the first *sherwanis* in Pakistan were stitched, and the first *achkans* were designed. It was also here that the name Aligarh *sherwani* was coined, inspired by the popularity of the design at Aligarh University. Though the founder of this shop, the late Muhammad Ramzan, has long passed away, his grandson, Muhammad Nawaz, 37, talks at length of the good old days.

According to Nawaz, you can tell quite a bit about a leader from the *sherwani* he wears. "Muhammad Ali Jinnah always wore a straight, simply stitched, black *sherwani*," he said, going through a sheaf of yellowed papers stacked up in front of him, "and from the dress alone you could tell that he was a man of principle."

President Ayub's fondness for an Aligarh-style white *sherwani* convinces Nawaz that he was a man of great grief and inner turmoil. Ziaul Haq's grey, flared *sherwani* apparently points to a stern personality, who doesn't take no for an answer and makes decisions all by himself.

After pronouncing judgments on the country's former leaders, Nawaz puts a thin sheet of paper in front of me.

embellishments, the cupboard is a look into the past of Pakistani fashion - a time when according to Nawaz, good work was appreciated.

"Nawaz Sharif would come to our shop and get his *sherwani* stitched, as did presidents Zia and Ayub, but now our prime minister and president wear ready-made," he says, sweat making his glasses slide down his nose. How can he tell that a *sherwani* is ready-made? "President Musharraf's *sherwani* just doesn't sit well on him, neither does Shaukat Aziz's."

To explain to the country's current leaders how important it is to get the right *sherwani* or *achkan* stitched, Nawaz has written letters to them, requesting them to give his services a try. But whether the eventual order comes from President Musharraf or Prime Minister Aziz, all clients have to pay Rs 3,000 for the stitching of the *sherwani*. "We do nothing for free," says Nawaz, "and those who understand good work take nothing for free."

The fact that Pakistan's rulers no longer get their *sherwanis* made-to-order is for Nawaz an indication of where the country is heading. He yearns for the days when all judges had to wear *sherwanis* in court and all parliamentarians had to be similarly decked out for assembly sessions. "We are becoming people who no longer know the value of good things," he says, lovingly folding yards of fine cloth left by a customer, "and that is dangerous."