

Festivals
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By Noshad Ali

Basant season: Big fun, big business

LAHORE: Come spring time and Lahore prepares for big fun and big business. Ardent Basant revellers estimate that tens of thousands of people from all over the country, and even a sprinkling of foreign tourists, converge on the city to welcome spring. And burn a hole in their pockets while they're at it.

So it goes this year as well. With preparations in full swing for the basant festival this coming weekend, small and big businesses alike are scrambling to prepare all the kites, lights, flowers and food that will go into fattening up their bottom lines.

Yousaf Sallahuddin, businessman and basant promoter estimates that Lahorites spend some Rs 150 million on the festival each year. Others put the figure at many times that level. And that doesn't account for the millions spent in other parts of the country where the festival is developing quite a following.

"Nearly all the businesses get shot in the arm," says Mr Sallahuddin. "Even tailoring shops do soaring business as many people order new dresses with yellow and green colours for the occasion."

Kite business flies high: After a four-month lull due to a ban imposed by the provincial authorities on kite flying, local producers say their sales have soared ahead of the festival since the ban has been lifted. Lahore's 300 odd kite shops are estimated to earn up to Rs 10,000 per day for the ten days

before basant. This translates to more than these retailers would earn in a full year of sales. Similarly, the 50 odd wholesalers of kites also do roaring business of up to Rs 1 million each during the run-up to basant.

Muhammad Siddique, runs one of the oldest kite shops of the city and says sales were significantly lower because of the ban but now kite sales in the city are soaring before the festival.

There are no confirmed estimates available about the number of kites of produced or sold for the festival but the number is expected to run into well over a million as a single kite-lover on an average flies around 25 to 30 kites on the day of the festival.

Normal kites are being sold in the range of Rs six to Rs 13 per kite while fancy kites are being sold in the range of Rs 25 to Rs 100 per kite, according to the size and art-work involved.

Production of strings, or manja, is part and parcel of the whole kite business.

Muhammad Hanif, a large kite and strings manufacturer, says they gradually build up stocks during the rest of the year for the basant festival. He says in days leading up to the festival his sales have soared, which would earn him enough money for rest of the year.

He says in last year's festival he sold strings worth more than Rs 2 million to different vendors and retailers of the city.

String makers were charging Rs 50 to Rs 60 for 2,000 yards of thread, significantly up from Rs 20 to Rs 40 charged during



off-season for the same length.

Decoration business: Light decoration and the sale of flowers and coloured buntings also picks up pace during basant as revellers rush to outdo each other.

Ghulam Rasool, an owner of Libra Light House, says normally customers demand searchlights for the basant night, and a single searchlight was available for Rs 50 per night. He says a few customers, usually national and multinational firms, also demand other types of light-decoration and last-minute prices as high as Rs

100 per night.

Food and catering soars: Lahore's well-known preoccupation with food also multiplies during basant leading to big business for the city's caterers who say basant brings them twice their average daily sales.

Caterers say demand is high from companies as well as individuals, who book orders for different kinds of food items, especially barbeques.

Agha Shehzad, of Libra Party Decorators and Catering Consultants, says the trend of barbeque is increasing every year as he has received ten orders from big companies while this figure was only five last year. He says these dishes are available for Rs 90 to Rs 100 per person but charges vary according to number of guests at a particular function.

Muhammad Aslam, an employee of Lahore's famous 'Phaja Siri Paey Wala', says people come in large number after Basant night to have breakfast.

"All such shops earn almost double on Basant morning as many people after whole night of kite flying go to different types of breakfast shops especially traditional foods like Harisa, Siri Paey, Bong, Halwa Poori," he says.

Rent out your rooftop: A new trend of renting out rooftops has emerged during the festival, which has now turning into a big business.

Many national and multinational companies arrange Basant function on big rooftops for their local and foreign guests.

These firms prefer buildings with reasonable height of four to six floors with covered area of about 3,500 square feet.

"The rates of those rooftops or such spaces like Lahore Fort, Defence, Samanabad, Iqbal Town, are from Rs 10,000 to Rs 300,000 per night," says Amjad Baba, an owner of a plaza at Shahalam.

He says rooftops of different plazas are available from Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000 according to plaza's height and location. Bigger ones cost up to Rs 100,000.

Other bigger venues like Lahore Fort and different Havailees inside the city are available from Rs 100,000 to Rs 300,000, Mr Baba adds. He says he himself has rented out rooftops of his five-storey plaza for Rs 25,000 to a national company.

Hotels also rake it in: Bookings at almost all of city's hotels have increased ahead of the festival compared with normal days and the four major hotels in the city report full occupancy for basant.

An employee at the sales department of Holiday Inn says all the rooms at the hotel are booked well in advance for the Basant festival. "Many foreigners have also reserved rooms for the occasion," he says, asking not to be named.

Kamal Ahmed, director sales at Pearl Continental, says his hotel is almost fully booked and by Basant all the rooms would be occupied. As will most of the city's businesses. Occupied in counting their boom-time earnings, that is.