

Basant brings in the money, say officials

■ Rs 20m Jashn-e-Baharan funded entirely by corporate sponsors

By Kirran Syed

LAHORE: People come here from all over the world and all over Pakistan to see Basant, boast Lahoris. And with them comes money, lots of it.

People host parties, hotels are booked, restaurants are packed, rickshaw drivers have no trouble finding fares and thousands of small retailers who sell kites and related merchandise do a bustling business.

Possibly the only ones in Lahore who do not see significant money change hands is the government. Since it began in 1997, the Jashn-e-Baharan Basant festival organised by the Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA) has had corporate sponsors foot the bill.

Kamran Lashari, who was at the Authority's helm when it began organising the festival, said no government or agency money is spent on the three-week event, despite what many members of the public believe. The government offers its logistical and political support by having the PHA officially organise the festival.

Mr Lashari said two major corporate sponsors, initially Coca Cola and later Pepsi, were responsible for funding the majority of the festival's events. Their support of events allows them to advertise their products to target consumers.

But it is less clear how the government benefits by supporting the festival. Mr Lashari said the PHA and government began supporting Basant to play a positive role in something that all of Lahore enjoyed. He said the government also realised that an organised and official Basant festival could bring both recognition and money to the city.

The efforts have paid off, said current PHA

Director General Shabbir Ahmad. He said the festival encourages economic activity, specifically spending by tourists.

Mr Ahmad estimated that the Jashn-e-Baharan festival costs Rs 20 million, but said this is nothing when compared with the billions in spending and investment it prompts. It is difficult to find a hotel room or rental car in Lahore in the weeks before the festival since it's all taken over by foreign and Pakistani tourists, he said.

Mr Ahmad said Coke and Pepsi remain the two primary sponsors, with each spending between Rs 3-4 million directly to publicise and produce events for the festival. In addition, these companies give the PHA a total of approximately Rs 10 million to spend on festival activities on their behalf, he said.

"The government doesn't spend a penny. We never ask for a refund from the government," he said. "We may, in the process, even save some money." He added that the "intention is not to make a profit".

Last year, the PHA had between Rs 600,000 and Rs 700,000 of the money it received from sponsors left over after completing necessary spending on festival events, said Mr Ahmad. The PHA used this money to develop parks and facilities.

He said the year's festival will cost approximately the same, Rs 20 million, but will have more events and possibly more sponsors. "We want the participation, in many cases, greater and the events better organised," said Mr Ahmad.

There are also intangible benefits, he added. "This puts Lahore on the cultural map," he said. The whole world turns to look at what is happening in Pakistan for a positive reason. "(The festival) portrays a

friendly face of Pakistan. We are a misunderstood nation. This develops an understanding with the outside world."

"This (also) promotes national integration between the provinces, the areas and social cohesion," he said. Mr Ahmad said all parts of the country have representatives in Lahore during the Basant festivities and all sectors of society enjoy this part of their culture.

But even Mr Ahmed admitted that there are some losses associated with Basant celebrations. "There are certain malpractices associated with the festival ... we want law enforcing agencies to curb these malpractices," he said.

People use metallic and glass- or chemical-coated string to fly their kites, which causes injuries and deaths, profit losses to the power authority and electricity outages, he said.

Lahore Electricity Supply Company official Akram Arain said electricity wires are shorted much more often during Basant activities because of metallic kite strings. Mr Arain said the company estimated its kite-related revenue losses because of power outages were in the millions last year.

"During the main day of Basant, between morning and night, only 10 percent of our electricity is on; 90 percent is automatically turned off" because metallic kite wires short or damage electricity lines and equipment, he said.

In addition, he said, the company's reputation is damaged. He said people complain that the company cannot maintain the electricity supply. He explained that it takes between ten minutes and several hours to restore electricity when a line is shorted.

Mr Arain encouraged people to fly kites safely to ensure that everyone, including officials at the power authority, could enjoy the Jashn-e-Baharan celebrations. ■