

Lahore: a different

BY SABEENA JALALDIN

Dawn
6-8-00

THIS time when I looked down the clouds, the earth appeared rather greener! A striking contrast to the last glimpses of the terrain I had left behind in Karachi. It was my second visit to Lahore, first being when I was three. Filled with excitement and thrill to be with my *nanoo* in the ancient town, I stepped out of the plane.

Lack of humidity was inviting. Roadside gardeners were busy in their work. Sweepers too were at work. "Is the chief executive expected to pass from here today?", I inquired, but to my stupefaction I unearthed the fact that this was just the routine. The roundabouts were all beautifully embellished. The Aziz Bhatti Chowk is one very commendable archetype.

Driving on, our driver Rehmat Bhai, announced that we were now on the beloved boulevard of the British, nostalgically named The Mall. We drove past the Secretariat, the Municipal Hall, the Lahore Museum, the Government College with Gothic towers and spires, the original Punjab University — an example of Indo-Saracenic architecture; the High Court in colonial style with wide Gothic arches, arcades and minarets.

There was a veritable cocktail of style and urbanity. Built in red and surrounded by green. *Bibi yeh hai lahor da P.C.*, my driver murmured. *Hmmn* where? I inquisitively surveyed around. The driver pointed out to an uninspiring, whitish gray building.

The first week of April was rather pleasant, but the weather turned hot day by day. By then I had been acquainted with my aunts and uncles. The second week of my

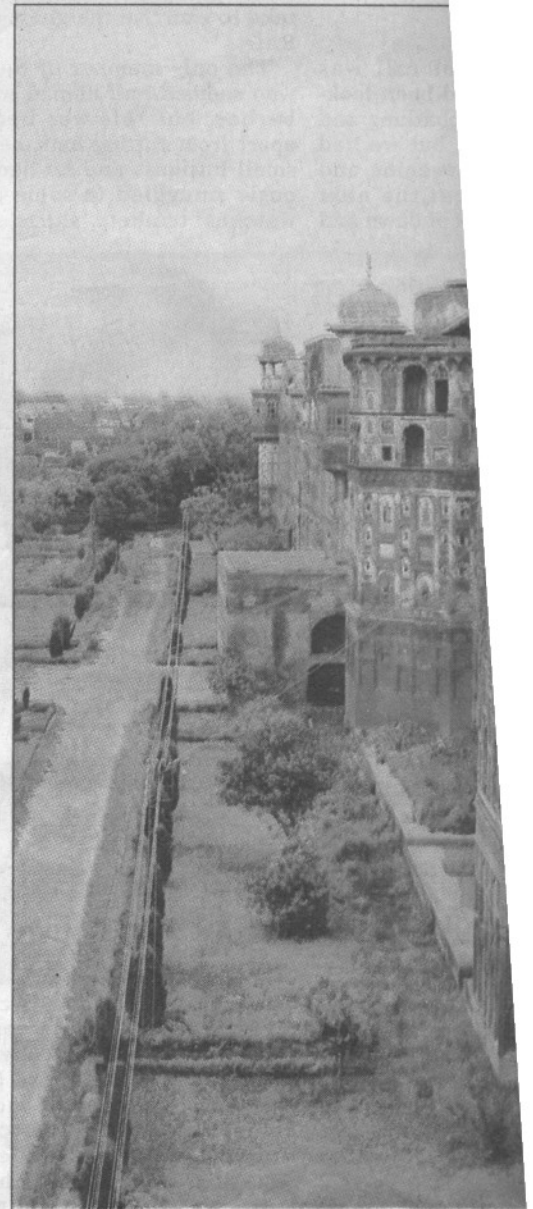
sojourn was spent surrounded by excited young female relatives. I was shown all the 'In' places of *Lohavar* (according to a myth, the founder of Lahore was Loh son of Hindu God Ram.)

'In' carries too much significance in the life of Lahoris. They all emphasized time and again that it is from Lahore from where the true spirit of fashion emanates, but later subtly asked, "what's 'in' in Karachi?"

One night it was decided that I should relish a meal at the copper kettle. Upon my divulging that we have one in Karachi too and I have been a frequent visitor there, they flatly declared: "this one is far better." The next night we decided to go for Chinese. Surprisingly, Lahore has only one worthy Chinese restaurant — nothing worth recommending. In my opinion a fine variety of luscious *chats*, *charchas* and *kebabs* are found on the roadside *tehras* where one can also listen to music from the blaring radios, if you possess the predilection for the sort.

The next one week was spent with my *nanoo's* sister, a retired associate professor at King Edward. The evenings would find us sitting in her small, but neatly trimmed lawn, and sipping *kanghi* and enjoying Locarts. She would tell me in ways, more than one, that Lahore is the undisputed centre of literacy, academic, economic and cultural life. Cultural part — I readily agreed.

Indeed, my stay with her updated my cultural history. It was amazing to know that for well over a thousand years, Lahore has been periodically ravaged and rebuilt by adventurers and conquerors alike. The Ghaznavids, the Mongols, the



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Afghans, the Mughals, the Sikhs and the British have all been here and left their indelible stamp on the city and its inhabitants. And still the walled city is known for its *Basant*, *Charaghan*, horse and cattle show, pigeon games, film industry and, of course, *heera mandi*.

There is no part of Lahore that does not come with a story. Beginning from Bagh-e-Kamran, Sher Shah Suri's Grand Trunk Road and the Royal Fort of Akbar (though now in a dilapidated state, has an amazing collection of old books at display; Múnajat 1233 A.H by Khwaja Abdullah Ansari; Dewane Hafiz 1240 A.H by Paras Ali; Laila Majnun by Noor-al-Din, just to name a few).

Then the most enduringly romantic, yet tragic, story of Anarkali and Prince Salim also came into existence in the fort; the enchanting *Khwab gah* within the fort built by Jehangir (the longest mosaic in the world); the Hiran Minar; fort at Sheikhpura; Nurjehan and Jehngir's tomb which were originally in the same garden, now separated by a noisy railway line. At least the emperors

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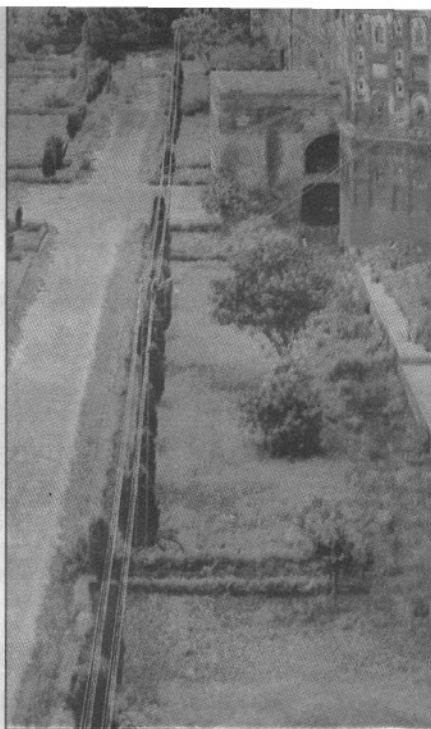
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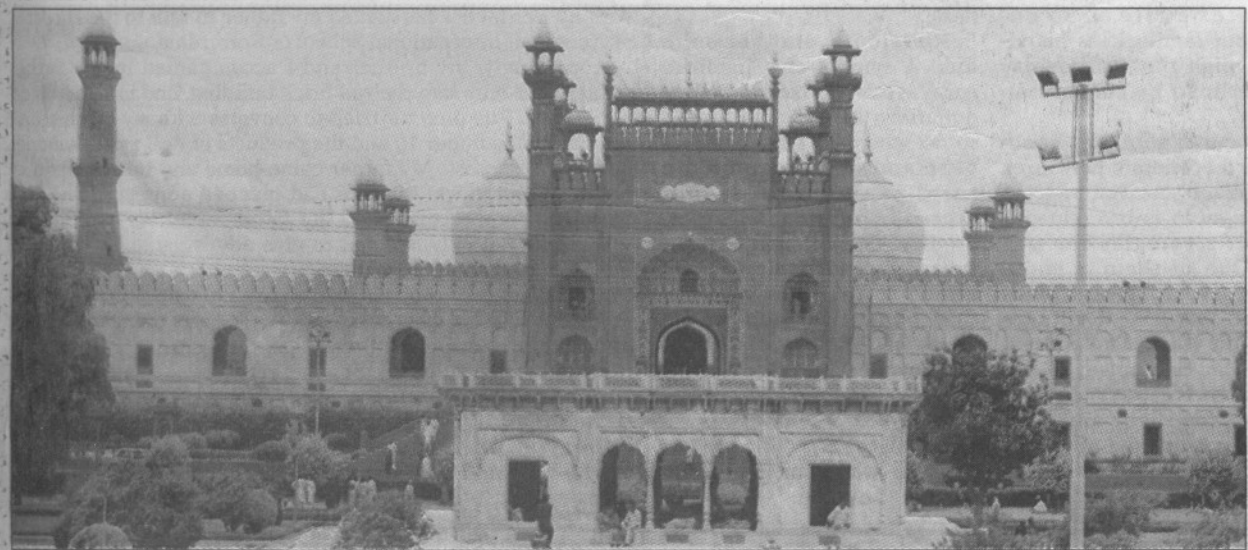
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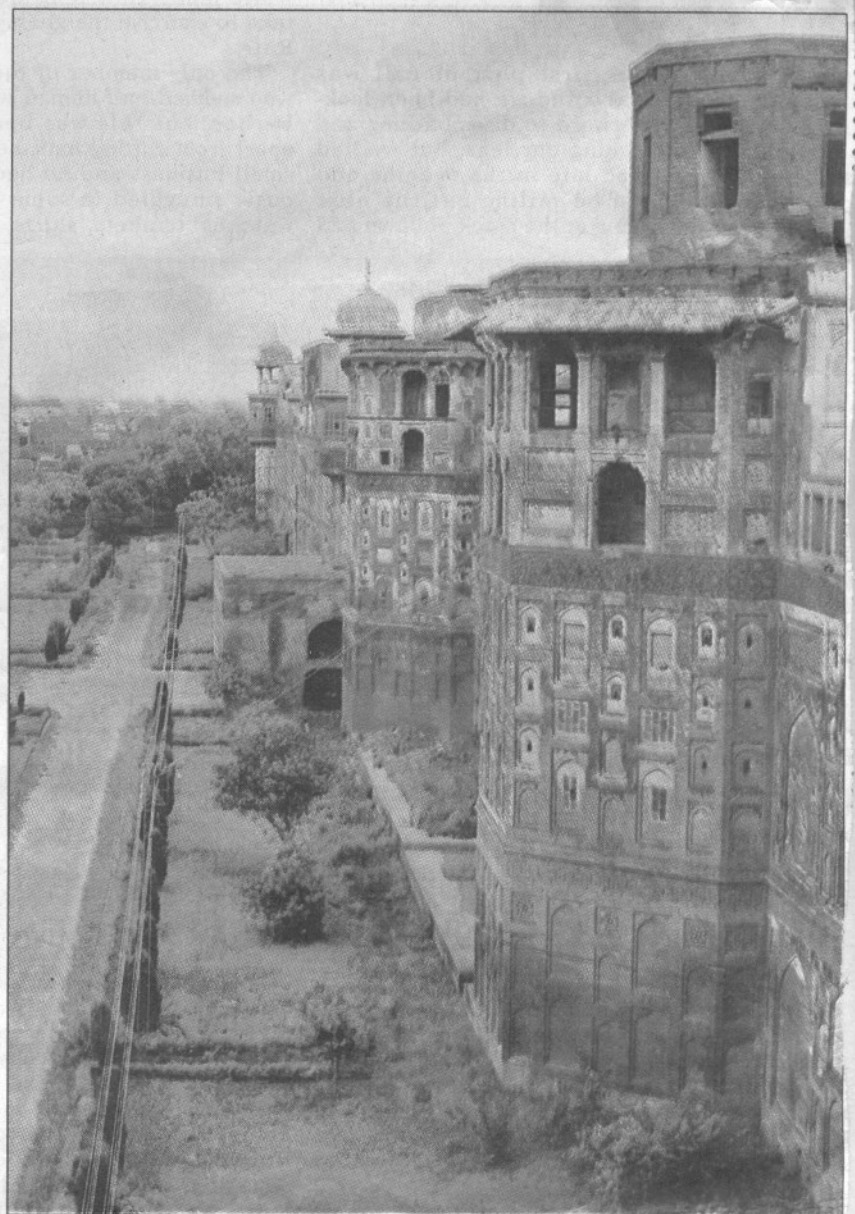
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day his love would be separated by Pakistan Railways.

Emperor Shahjehan's 30 years of reign were probably the most glorious years of Lahore. He bestowed Lahore with the Shish Mahal, Moti Masjid, Summun Buri, Fabled marbled Naulakha Pavilion and Shalimar Garden.

Talking about yet another cultural sacrifice in the name of modernization is the abolition of the garden of Chuburji made by Aurangzeb's daughter, Zebunnisa Begum — a poetess. Now all that remains of the garden is the gateway with four towers, liberally decorated with enamelled tiles, in the midst of the busy commercial district with large yellow, red, green metro buses, rickshaws and *chand garis kinkii* (motor-bike rickshaws), zooming here and there.

It was the 23rd of April, a cloudy Easter Sunday. It had rained a day before and Lahore was in its full glory. Nanoo decided to take me sightseeing and hence we set forth for the Ravi Road with sufficient stocks of snacks. On the way I could not help, but notice the lack of cosmopolitan nature of the city. I began missing my city — city thrust across the waters of the Arabian sea, holding an eternal allure and presenting



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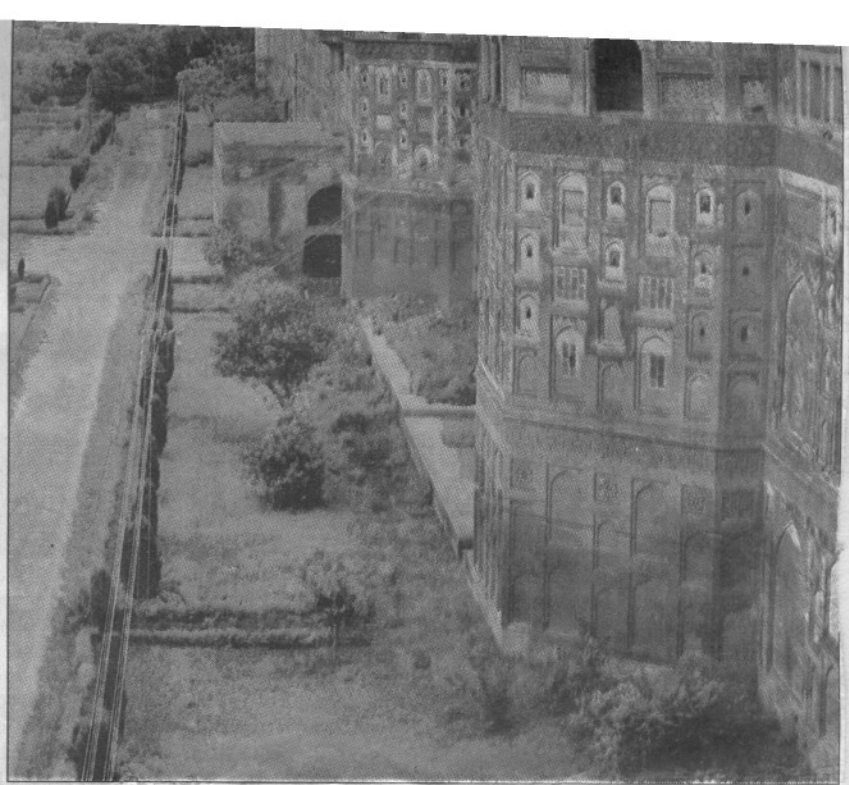
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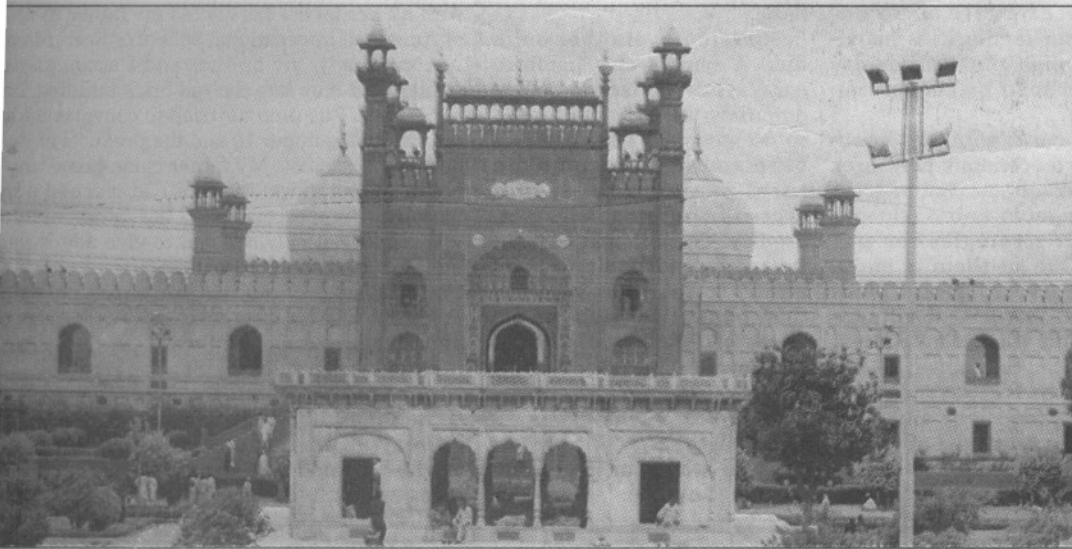
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ing an eternal allure and presenting
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tion of the old and the new. Soon my
thoughts were interrupted by our dri-
ver-cum-guide. He informed me that
we were at Data Darbar. After paying
our tribute to Data Sahib, we headed
on. On the right was the Badshahi
Masjid, the Qila and Ranjit Singh's
Samadhi, and on the left was the
place where 100 children were
slaughtered recently by a maniac!

After a couple of days, the sun
became merciless. The nights were
also hot, no cool breeze at all. As
dusk falls, it becomes harder to
ignore that Lahore settles into a
starkling quiet and people rarely go
out after nine at night. The city
sinks into its horizon.



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