

Getting Lahore out of a Lahori

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IT is no idle boast. The famous saying is, 'Lahore Lahore aaye,' or translated loosely, 'Lahore is Lahore.' This ancient city lives in the heart and soul of its original inhabitants. It is not without reason that they say that you can get a Lahori out of Lahore, but you can never get Lahore out of a Lahori.

Many readers might think that Lahoris are a bit too sentimental about their city in a cranky sort of way. But then all people love the soil from which they sprang. It has a strange power over men. Just like elephants return to their birthplace to die, so do Lahoris.

A few of them having lived all their lives abroad, want to be buried in Lahore. It is like that joke about a Lahori who fell ill in Makkah, and after considerable prayers to Allah did not find a remedy. In the end, he wrote to his mother to distribute a *deg* of pilaf at the Data Darbar. That was his ultimate solution, and most Lahoris would probably agree with him. I write this column under considerable duress. Two of my brothers live in the West, and from time to time they put in strange requests. Let me share a few of these requests because more than brick and mortar, this city is about a strange species, a character, a sentimental human called a Lahori.

My elder brother in England sent me an e-mail asking me to go to Gawalmandi and eat half a seer (now called a kilo) of fish from Sadar's shop. Get a *palla* and not some silly fatty piece, he instructed, and I was asked not to eat it with any bread (*naan*), for I was not a pauper or an upstart, but the scion of one of the oldest families of the Walled City. When I returned his request with the suggestion that he should bloody well come over and eat it with me, he actually rang back and at the ripe young age of 54 cried like a baby. That

really upset me and I went, met Sardar after ages, who heaped scorn on me for not visiting him like I used to in the good old days. I used to frequent the shop with, among others, the late Muhammad Idress during the days *The Pakistan Times* was the sole English-language newspaper and he was a media rage, and I used to spend half the night visiting strange haunts, including the mortuary at Mayo to pick up a scoop. The marriage took the sting out of such visits, and these visits slowly began to fizzle out.

The younger brother had an even stranger request to make all the way from Canada. He asked me to go to Lahori Gate and try out the *nihari* with fresh *kulchas*. I told him to bugger off and go for a walk in the Canadian cold, and no sentimental telephone calls, please. But these requests set me thinking, and it reminded me of my old friend Sheikh Ghazanfar Iqbal of Allied Bank, whom I rate as an "unknown authority" on the old city. He lived all his life inside Bhati Gate, as did his forefathers before him, and on shifting to the Cantonment, felt lost, isolated. This is a phenomenon that is never written about, and I must dwell, out of sheer respect for the late Mr Nayyar Iqbal, on this in some detail. It was at their house where we were often provided with probably the finest *harrisa* ever cooked, and we were even instructed on how to eat it ... heated on a low coal fire and laced with ginger.

Ghazanfar alias Sheero had a major problem when his family first shifted to the cantonment. Early in the morning both father and son would catch a bus to the old city, where they would meet their neighbours and friends, have tea at their old haunt, and Ghazanfar would go off to work in the bank. The old man would return to the old house just off Tambakoonan Wali Gali — Tobacco Lane — which is the first left lane after entering Bhati Gate. There he would stretch out and chat with his brother who lived next door.

The entire day was spent in his

normal routine, and in the evening he would return to his new home. This went on for years, and finally after a serious illness he could not make it. This had a terrible effect on Nayyar Sahib, who slowly began to slip. His heart and soul were not where his body was, and the body began to give way. Then one day his soul left his body and his old friends all came from the old Walled City. They sat silently, nodding their heads in disapproval, and then one man said sadly: "Why did Nayyar have to leave his roots, if you uproot a tree, it will surely die." Everyone agreed to the logic of the old city. It was a sad day for Sheero, my friend, for his soul still lives inside Bhati Gate, but he approaches the problem very differently, and that is because his children are growing up in the cantonment.

We discuss this problem of roots a lot, and it was after considerable thinking that I came up with the idea of taking my two daughters every Sunday on a visit to the old city. We would visit an area, and walk with them telling them stories that I had heard from my father. They initially thought I was crazy, but soon they began to enjoy it. Then one day my elder daughter wanted to go to a particular area. "Why that place?" I asked. "Nothing. I thought I would try out the *kulchas* myself today." "Ahh, she has arrived," I thought and I looked upwards, winking in happiness to the Almighty for listening to a silent prayer of mine. I have my own equation upstairs.

The elder daughter now lives in Cambridge, England, with her husband Hasan, who has become half a Lahori by now. The couple have just returned from a trip to Italy, where they both thought Venice was almost like old Lahore, but much cleaner. But then Naples is also like old Lahore, but much dirtier. "That is incorrect," I told her. "No Papa, any place that is Lahore and does not have *harrisa* and fresh *kulchas* is dirtier." The tradition lives, and that is why "Lahore Lahore Aaye." —

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