

Traditions that cannot be wished away

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THE essential part of Lahore in the years before and after the partition of the Punjab were three exciting events, they being the annual Government College-Islamia College cricket match, the Crescent Club-Mamdot Club cricket rivalry and the Mela Chiragan. The first one got banned, the second faded away, while the third seems to have lost its appeal in an age of elites who are essentially illiterate and detached from the people.

But these three events made up an essential part of Lahore, and it reflected the ethos of the city, being a happy mix of education, sports, history and folklore. This is an acceptable mix in any healthy society. A cynical view of the mix today could be classed as a crude mix of extremist versions of religion, crass commercialism, 'fast food' versions of a gentleman's sport.

Sheer gluttony itself speaks volumes of where we are going. Today there is not a single sports annual feature that we can pride ourselves in. Even the annual rowing gala on the Ravi is no more for the river has become a polluted industrial waste nullah, when it is flowing at all. The annual monsoon flow is the only cleansing feature nature has kept in its hands, and thank God

for that.

The Government College-Islamia College annual cricket match, held in the old university grounds, was a feature when blackboards would come up all over the old city and the latest score was rushed to the boards and people would gasp and discuss the situation. It was a matter of immense pride for any man to wear a cricket 'blue' of the two colleges. He was considered a special person in Lahore. Being a cricket blue meant being well educated and having an all-round personality. These qualities merited special consideration and any young man in those days considered it 'made.' I was talking to Khalid Qureshi, a cricketer of yesteryear the other day, and he was an Islamia College 'cricket blue', and let me clarify in the opposite camp to my father who was a Ravian 'cricket blue,' and his opinion was that his family were much more happy when he played the GC-Islamia match than when he played his one odd 'unofficial' Test against the MCC. Such was the interest.

As a young school-going child I remember my elder brother Rahim going to play one of the last 'classic clashes' all decked out in his best whites. My father was very proud of him, and my mother that day gave him an extra slice of bread with thick butter to keep his energy going. He returned in the evening looking like a gladiator rather than a gentleman at large. Our college had beaten the hell out of "those Islamia scum," and Rahim had just managed to get home swinging his bat left and right as bricks were rained on him. Fights had broken out at

different parts of the old city and along The Mall, and President Ayub Khan banned the annual feature. The ban took the sting out of the 'healthy rivalry' and it has never recovered.

It must be said that this rivalry had its roots in the 'Muslim' character of Islamia College, while the Government College was basically an elitist institution with Hindu and Sikh students being in majority. It must be made clear that the Muslims were their best cricketers. The teams almost resembled an All-India team, high in quality and guts, not to speak of the rivalry and the tradition. At these matches the staple diet was 'puthooras' and 'channay', a deliciously sporting diet to this day.

Away from the old university ground in the famous Minto Park, now called Iqbal Park, two well-known cricket clubs, Crescent and Mamdot, battled it out in what was an 'awami' replay of the Islamia-GC rivalry. Crescent Club still exists, and in the old days most Test players belonged to one of these two cricket clubs. Whenever they clashed in a tournament, the entire old city would be aware of it and huge crowds would gather. By the time the match started, a carnival like atmosphere would be created, and people rooted for their favourites. In the pre-partition days all the big names would be in the two teams, and it was almost as if a Test match was on. But then the structure of cricket has been woven around commercial houses and not the land itself, and this has robbed cricket of its unique place in the lives of the

people.

This unique place now can be seen in the hundreds of grounds and open spaces on a Sunday morning, where young boys display their talent as cricketers, and from the streets they are picked up and make it to the top. The stories of Abdul Qadir, of Yusuf Youhana, of Saqlain Mushtaq and scores of other big names are stories that must be told, again and again, for people to realize just how little those running the affairs of sports have done for sportsmen. But then like education we do not have funds for sports. Perhaps things will change one day.

But then the third major event in the life of old Lahore was the Mela Chiragan, the Urs of Madho Lal Husain. It is a fact of life than even our own newspapers have stopped telling the youngsters of today the true story of Madho and Husain, two men who loved each other so much that they were buried together.

Lahore celebrates this true love like no other city does. It has a mystical touch to it, it has a definite touch of sport to it, it brings forth the best of food, it is the beginning of spring, of life itself, and all these are celebrated. But as our elite classes are basically illiterate, they have stopped going to this 'mela,' because beautiful poetry and song fill the air, and people from all over the countryside converge to pay their respects to Madho Lal Husain. This is one event that just cannot go away, for Lahore, spring means Basant and it means Mela Chiragan, and these two events will probably go on even if Lahore is razed to the ground once again. — MAJID SHEIKH