

# The day the butchers had their noses cut off

Lahore

11.5.82

Dawn

IT was a bizarre sight by any standards. If you enter the Delhi Gate of Lahore's Walled City, almost 50 yards down the main entrance there is a butcher's shop on the corner of a lane starting to the left. This is the beginning of Mohallah Qassaban — the Butchers Precinct. Almost 223 years ago at this point the noses and ears of the butchers of Lahore were cut off to avert a disaster.

This brutal act took place because the Walled City was surrounded by the combined forces of the Sikhs. They were threatening to attack and torch the city if the butchers of Lahore were not handed over to them. The governor, or *subedar* as he was known then, did not want to hand over his citizens to the blood-thirsty Sikhs, so he opted for a bizarre solution. He got hold of a few butchers, cut off their noses and ears, and presented the Sikhs with these 'presents' on a silver platter. He then opened Delhi Gate and the bleeding butchers, with their noses and ears cut off, were handed over to the Sikh forces, who left in jubilation. A major crisis had been averted.

This amazing event in the history of Lahore happened in the reign of the Afghan invader, the Durrani Ahmad Shah, who had appointed a *subedar* by the name of Kabuli Mal. This strange event took place because the butchers of Lahore had over time developed an

intense hatred for the Sikhs, who at every turn clashed with them. Every time these encounters were fierce, leading to considerable blood being spilled. The butchers knew how to slice a man in two with ease, and the Sikhs feared them. The Sikhs, because of sheer numbers, relished a battle with them to avenge old wounds. The last such clash of over 500 years of hatred took place during the partition of the Punjab in 1947, ending, hopefully, a sorry tale that needed to be wound up and put to rest.

The original enmity has its origin in the death of the Sikh guru Arjun on the banks of the River Ravi just outside the walls of the Lahore Fort. Sikh folklore has it that he dived into the river and disappeared forever in a 'divine act.' The Muslims think he died, while bathing in the river, from wounds received from torture in the Lahore Fort. But his death was blamed on the emperor Shah Jehan, who faced a popular rebellion. The royal forces rounded up militant followers of Guru Arjun from all over the Punjab. Of these, almost 9,000 were brought to Lahore in chains. The emperor ordered the butchers of Lahore to slaughter them just outside Yakki Gate, and for one whole week they were slaughtered. It was a massacre the Sikhs never forgot, and they decided to avenge the slaughter by killing the entire butcher community of Lahore. The siege of Lahore took place because of this original enmity.

The slaughter of the Sikhs by the butchers of Lahore led the Hindu population to press the emperor to remove all butchers, or cow slayers as they were called then, from the city. After considerable hesitation the emperor succumbed to this demand and he set them up

outside Lahore in the place where today is located the Lahore Hide Market (Chamra Mandi). They were assisted considerably by the emperor and almost all of them built beautiful 'havelis,' a few of which still survive, as well as a beautiful mosque, a rebuilt version of which still exists on the corner of the road going into the Hide Market. This arrangement worked well for some time. Problems started to arise as the power of the Muslims began to slide and Sikh militancy grew apace. The time for revenge had come for the great grandchildren of the original victims, and they targeted the butchers instead of the crown.

The Sikhs operating outside Lahore attacked the area, and the butchers counter-attacked with knives and hatchets in a brutal encounter that saw the Sikhs retreat with huge losses. They had never seen such an enemy, and this incident tended to unite the Sikhs, who by now had vowed to seek revenge for the original massacre. A second and larger attack took place, and again the battle was intense and bloody. The Sikhs again withdrew in the face of fierce knives and hatchets used with tremendous skill. After all what did they expect butchers fighting for their lives to do? Local legend has it that even the womenfolk of the butchers fought side by side with their men.

*Subedar* Kabuli Mal was at his wit's end as to how to resolve this enmity. The Sikhs would not discuss anything but the complete elimination of all butchers from Lahore, which was also part of their quasi-Hindu faith. The Muslim population of the city, which was a majority by this time, demanded their right to eat meat, and for that butchers were essential.

The Durrani Ahmad Shah ordered that the butchers be resettled inside the Walled City, and it was then that the entire population of butchers was resettled in Mohallah Qassaban. The incident of the siege of Lahore did not last for more than 36 hours, and the solution seems to have satisfied the crazed Sikhs, who felt the humiliation of the butchers was enough punishment for them.

The reign of Maharajah Ranjit Singh saw just one incident when this mohallah was attacked and the houses set on fire. The crafty Sikh ruler ordered that the Sikh chiefs of Lahore should either slaughter cows or leave the butchers alone. They never bothered the butchers after that. During the British rule no incident of any importance except for stray happenings by crazed individuals took place. But they certainly did erupt when the fires of hatred burned in Lahore in 1947.

The rape and massacre of Muslim girls from Lahore in an Amritsar girls hostel led to attacks on Sikhs inside the Walled City. They formed a *jattha* and roamed around the Shahalami area. The first major attack on the Muslims was on the Mohallah Qassaban, where six butchers were slaughtered. The next night the butchers hit back with a vengeance. From that point onwards the blood never stopped flowing till each and every Sikh had fled this city of love and poetry. With their exit ended a feud that had needlessly cost hundreds and thousands of lives. It seems emperors never seem to understand that acts of evil never die. The Machiavellian Prince has also been advised never to butcher in the name of establishing his reign and rule. Better settlements are always possible. But it seems the Prince never learns. — **MAJID SHEIKH**