

The nasty thing about knowing a bit of economics is that one can see the owner's point of view also. Like a Sheriff's posse from the Old West, a host of Commissioners and Deputies, reinforced by Marshal Kamran Lashari and his friendly bankers, are trying to bring the man to heel, offering him all kinds of goodies. Main goodie is assurance of a minimum annual income of six or eight lacs! That will not even pay the electricity bill rung up by Zahid Dar and Intezar Hussain sitting there! Besides, by conservative rumour, he can set up a tire shop, sit back and let a platoon of urchins run around vulcanizing, and make ten times as much — so one can see his point.

And yet I say thank the Lord for Kamran Lashari and his posse. He has cajoled, or arm-twisted a lot of people to take up a lot of empty spaces in the town and turn them into little gardens and fountains. Some of them are pretty and some of them are eyesores; but the fact is that the thought that



The Tea House and other Baithaks!

*Latif
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a thing is worth doing because it is beautiful, or noble, or good for the spirit, even if you do not make a quick buck, does not occur to many bankers. It occurs to even fewer bureaucrats.

Not long ago, when the Alhamra was just a proposal, at every meeting the eyes of a lot of officers used to gleam at the thought of this scrumptious chunk of land right on the Mall. They never failed to come up with some bright-eyed proposal that we build a lot of spaces round the theater which could be rented out to banks, restaurants, whatever.

That would make the Alhamra 'economically viable' and reduce the 'burden on the

exchequer', and save 'public money' — so they could take it home I guess. It took years of persuading to convince them that some things are worth doing even if they are not 'economically viable'. A pan shop in the Naulakha Pavilion, or the Shahi Masjid would make lots of money, but it wouldn't be very nice!

That is just it. A place requires many things to make it a town or a great city. Of course it needs commerce and business and manufacturing, that is what gives it sinews and wherewithal. But to give it a soul it needs other things. What makes a great city is not the Stock Exchange and the Chamber of Commerce; it is the eccentricities and the baubles!

If the Pak Tea House ends up as a tire shop, it will not

make one billionth as much money as is made in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. But what makes the place a great city is Greenwich Village with its narrow streets and gaudy shops and gay parades and chances of getting mugged.

Or Paris. It couldn't live without the commerce, but the Guide Books, and the legends are about Montmartre with its starving artists, and the West Bank, a cauldron of sleazy eateries and nationalities; and they do mention commerce in the now long-gone wholesale market of Les Halles, but only because the haulers there would gladly drop a side of beef at the sight of a pretty girl and chortle, "Ooh! La, la!" And mostly because it was home to Irma La Douce, and if you don't know about that, go





ahead and open your own tire shop.

There hasn't been an actual nation state called Bohemia for some time, but the name lives on, because it has become the generic term for all starving artists — Bohemian! As for commerce the Krupps of Essen made trillions supplying Germany the armaments for two World Wars, but their name lives only because they named their biggest gun after their own grandmother — 'Big Bertha'!

The pity is that I thought we knew this. Lahore was, at one time, full of 'Takiyaas' and 'Saraais' and 'Baithaks' — places where people would meet, not to discuss business but for the more lasting pleasure of charming conversation, or telling pretty stories. And the 'Zindah Dilaan' of Lahore became known not by putting ads in the papers but from these 'baithaks' where people learnt to be civilised and cultured and didn't expect to be paid for it. As I said I can see the owner's point of view, but I also know that no one is ever going to take out a procession to turn a historic tire shop into a national monument! ♦