

Lahore is changing!

Lahore
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Is Lahore changing? I asked a businessman in Lahore. 'I guess not. Because it is still 50 years behind Karachi. It is difficult to read the psyche of Lahorites. If they make Rs 1000 in a day, they spend Rs 1200 on the night on food and fun.' They are yet to adapt corporate culture and those who deal in food know it and they make good money.' He was not wrong. The idea of food street launched and within few nights, it was like a hot cake. In Lahore one can never remain hungry there is every thing one can think of. From 'sakanjabin' to crispy 'charcha' to 'methai' prepared with 'asli ghee' and 'parathas' with meat inside and 'qulchayee' and 'nans' and juices of every fruit. People of Lahore love to eat; it is visible everywhere and in abundance.

The teeming poor of the city eat at 'Data Darbar' perhaps the holiest of the places in Pakistan. 'Langar, Langar' street cooks shouted as an army of homeless people rushed to grab 'baryani' with 'methay chawal'. These people are of every age and colour and race. You can find man in tattered jeans to old lady in torn clothes with thick glasses. They are quite aggressive while they beg for money and food. They sleep on the vast floor of 'Data Sahib' with so peace they have no worry of the world; this is charisma of that great saint. It attracts all and sundry. And mostly poor and destitute of rich Punjab. Still, leaders like Mumtaz Bhutto, Qadir Magi, Makhdoom Khaliq and Altaf Hussain think 'Punjab is eating

every thing of Pakistan' they must visit 'Darbar' so they could see for themselves how powerful 'Punjabis' live; they barely survive on handouts.

Still, these real great people make no complaint; they blame none for their plight. They hardly know about NFC award or about the 'unjustified' distribution of Indus water. They firmly believe in Pakistan and they are dead sure good days for them are round the corner. 'Allah karam kare ga' a poor one-legged young man with scratches told me at 'Data Darbar'. I wanted to ask some thing else. He left me guessing as he refuses to accept extra money for dry rose-petals and 'tabaruk'. 'I am disabled but I am not a beggar' he remarked and limped away. I was stunned. 'Khudi ko kar buland itna' this man was real disciple of Iqbal unlike those who love to preach Iqbal day and night and practice less or none.

'Do you still like Nawaz Sharif?' I asked a man selling some lemon juice on a normal hot afternoon at Shalamar. 'Nawaz tay sanon kutch ne deta' (Nawaz gave us nothing to us) 'tay may us day wastay keon karoon duwan' (why should I pray for him) in his zeal to make Lahore look beautiful, Sharifs embarked upon some ambitious plans to clean up the mess in the walled city and that disturbed many including the poor and the rich and the powerful. Lahorites love old values, places and traditions. True he wanted to see their city developed but they perhaps would seldom allow major

changes; they tend to like their city as it is long association has perhaps made its way into the psyche of Lahore. They like *status quo* more than others in the country. But they seldom accept it.

But the change is everywhere; the city once of colleges now transformed into a city of rickshaws of every colour, makes and designs. From a noisy rickety to a silent one; this is the vehicle mostly used by middle class of Lahore. In Karachi who rides a motorbike is poor while in Lahore, he is a middle class person. These men are more law abiding

than their compatriots in other parts. At 3 am in the morning it was surprising to find a whole family merely going about but the rider stopped at red signal. It was unprecedented by Karachi standard. But the most astonishing thing was not to find an army of policemen manning Lahore streets. They were not visible. When some body makes any mistake they emerge from nowhere demand money quickly accept and leave the scene. They hate to argue for illegal money. Give them as you please without any hassle. I never give them more than 50, a driver confided, 'I have a friend in the police he is very honest. The moment he makes Rs. 400 he stops taking any money; this is his daily budget for the family. He prays five times a day since his salary is meager with five daughters. This is another side of the story, perhaps.

'I can't enjoy the ride of sports car in the main city' complained younger son of a top bureaucrat, 'every time I put my foot on gas paddle, I find a tonga in my way.' This is strange phenomenon in Lahore as one can see patches of poor neighbourhood — alongside rich localities. On any road you see a new car parked beside a donkey cart; this is another unavoidable fact of Lahore.

People love fruits, mutton and chicken; 'muragh' is still the favourite and dominates dining table. Indeed the use of fruits is on the higher side but people even poor ones don't like vegetable. Only those munch them who are on a diet or forbidden to eat meat on doctor's advice.

But lot of people now wears joggers and old ladies too love sneakers on 'shalwar kameez'. Youngsters of Lahore are divided; those rich looked satisfied while poor find no future while middle class tends to lose hope. This is alarming. Yet education is a roaring business in Lahore; one can see hundreds of posters, banners, sign boards heralding a bright future for those who pay money to learn computers, English language and business. There is new world of educational experts, mostly self-made who mint money and cheat poor and middle class.

Boys of Lahore look a lost lot while girls are forward-looking and in some cases, more aggressive than the boys. After 9/11 whole world of Lahore youths has perhaps fallen in the debris

of twin towers of New York. The future of IT on the basis of it General Musharraf promised 2.5 million jobs hooks almost doomed.

Do Lahorites see any future of 'doomed' politicians Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto? They looked divided on this issue. Some blame Sharifs for breaching their trust and leaving in disgrace, others are prepared to pardon them, if they promised not to repeat earlier mistakes. For BB, right now they envision no future' she is with none, they claim. During all these years BB has not gained in Punjab, all agree. What they think of new brother-sister relationship, which is in the offing? This is an eyewash; they distrust each other so much; they can't get along well in politics. Perhaps powerful Choudhries of Gujrat know it well. But about one thing Lahorites are dead sure: whenever NS and BB come back they would go straight to 'Data Darbar' and pray. But right now nobody is praying for their return.

There are changes visible in Lahore, which exhibits prosperity and progress during last two decades of political turmoil. There are hundreds of big and small shops and an army of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs has emerged. The prices of property have risen abnormally as one fellow put it 'for all this I thank Altaf Hussain.'

The property that could hardly fetch Rs 2 million now runs into Rs 20 million. Land around new airport is exorbitant; this has become a prime location.

One thing would never change

in the people of Lahore their faith in Allah in Pakistan and their patriotism. How much they love this country go to Wagah and observe it. They travel miles eat dust to see their enemy standing across the border; they vow to make him eat the dust. Their faith is unflinching. They dance to the dunes of national songs of Junoon groups. I saw an old man with only one hand but he was waving national flag with honour. These people able and disable would never allow any ruler khaki or civilian to compromise on their honour. For them, India is the only enemy. Period.

One-legged self-respecting youngster to one-armed senior, they all love and want to die for this country and its lands and its people. Perhaps there is no match of Lahore in this patriotism. Their faith in the country is unflinching; it is transparent and undiluted and without any interest. They will never allow any body to compromise on this faith; this is Pakistan. 'Lahore Lahore haye; it is true. It is peerless; this is the lynchpin for this country They deserve thanks for this not the customary abuses and cruises of a bunch of greedy and wholly unpatriotic political lot.

Dirty politicians have no right whatever to malign a clean citizenry. This is unfair. But Lahorites don't mind it; they don't care. They are carefree people. If they are angry they drink one more 'lassi' they are cool customers. True, Lahore is the heart and the soul of the country. This is Lahore; this is Pakistan.