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Lahore News

Lahore: the eternally haunting city

Lahore does not haunt me as it used to; I do not incessantly layout elaborate plans for it anymore, nor do I allow myself to be carried away by a nostalgic return to the city of my youth. Years of absence from this beloved city, a gradual shift in my own interests and concerns and a wilful abandonment of literature have blunted the desire to recreate this fabulous city through any artistic expression. But as I write these lines in Lahore, its heartbeat draws me into an irresistible symphony.

I had come to Lahore to attend the International Iqbal Conference (April 21-24) which attracted more than forty Iqbal scholars from all over the world. The Conference was inaugurated by our very dear General who arrived 65 minutes late and left us with a new understanding of Iqbal, albeit one in which the sheer mention of *mard-e momin* is blasphemy. Neither the soaring eagle of Iqbal's poetic imagery, nor his passionate reconstruction of a vision of life, which demands awakening and reorientation of the personal and collective self towards the lofty heights of Qur'aanic ideal, were the subject matter of his speech.

His realism only drew our attention towards the mundane, the ephemeral and the grimy state of the country and the Muslim world. This is indeed, a pragmatism bordering on hypocrisy and a wilful distortion of Iqbal's most abiding concerns. Taking the present situation of the ummah as his point of departure, he could only lament, as everyone else does: there is no unity among the believers, we are weak and cannot take on the enemy. But he, along with all the others who lament, failed to take the next step, an attempt to understand why we are in this predicament. And of course, he is, along with all those who have usurped power, part of the problem. After all, the immoral and illegal dispensation that he has wrought through a military coup has only added to the already murky waters of a state envisioned by Iqbal. And during the last three and half years, his self-appointed role has lost all moral authority, if there was any to start with.

But let no General take away the blissful joy of reconnection with this glorious city of so many faces. During the last few days, I have walked through the streets of Old Lahore, miles and miles of winding streets which still pulsate with a life steeped in another era, another time. It is this ancient Lahore which deserves to be celebrated in this column. The return to the city of my birth coincided with the annual urs of Ali Usman Hujveri, who arrived in this city a millennium ago, following the directions of his spiritual master. His shrine/mosque complex, where I offered the Friday prayer, was filled with thousands of men, women and children. Once inside the now greatly extended shrine/mosque complex, one leaves behind the world and enters a different reality. The *khateeb* reminded us that for more than 1000 years, this place has been providing free food to all, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This, in itself, is a remarkable tradition.

But it was after the prayers that the most enchanting scenes were observed. Here was a group of men, reciting the traditional salutation to the Prophet (PBUH), there, in a corner by the pillar, a single devotee was immersed in *zikr*. Spread throughout the courtyard, groups of men, women and children had created so many little worlds of their own. I stood by a circle which had formed voluntarily and was being directed by a master in a *zikr* session. Men, and a group of women behind them, were glorifying their Creator through a centuries old method of remembrance. Allah, Allah, their chants grew into a rhythmic pattern, several men started to enter the inner reality of things and soon



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everything else was washed away for them; only the face of their Lord existed for them in that intense moment of concentration that lifted their hearts from the mundane levels of existence. I thought of Baghdad and of Junaid Baghdadi, who is reverentially mentioned in Hujveri's wonderful book, *Kashf al-Mahjub*. I thought of Imam Abu Hanifa whose shrine has now achieved a new significance. And of Hallaj whose ashes were scattered in the river where American checkpoints now ask Iraqi men to lower their pants and raise their shirts to prove that they are not suicide bombers. I thought of the desecration of a tradition, a tradition that has always sought to live in remembrance of the Creator, by men and women who hold no respect for the Everlasting and whose arrogance, brute power and tragic deprivation has led them to a land where posterity will remember them along with Halaku and Changiz.

As I walked through the narrow, winding streets of the Old City, I recalled a walk through similar streets in Isfahan, where traditional artisans were crafting their beautiful artefacts, just like the goldsmiths, the embroiderers, and the block makers were busy in their daily routines in this beloved city. This spiritual link of Lahore to Baghdad, Isfahan and so many other Islamic cities remains as strong as ever; no occupation army can take away these ties.

But along with this ancient Lahore, there are so many others, cities within cities. I walked on the lower Mall and found my old school in more or less the same exterior form as it was forty years ago. Nostalgia took me to my grade 5 classroom where once Mrs Farasat used to teach us things they do not teach anymore. Then there was the memory of the first mass movement in Pakistan led by ZA Bhutto. I recalled his address to the lawyers in the small open space of the courts and the subsequent movement which would lead to the downfall of Ayub Khan. Then there was the Nasir Bagh, then called Gol Bagh, where Ayub Khan's henchmen had flooded the

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ground and let electrical current run through the water while Bhutto was addressing the crowds.

There are still some buildings on Old Campus which look as they did fifty years ago, but many others have changed; even the General Post Office has a new face. The tea-house, where I expected to find Zahid Dar, was empty; no one has time to sit for hours and discuss everything under the sun. Lahore's literary scene is no more what it used to be. With so many of its writers and poets dead or gone, there is hardly a semblance of a culture rooted in literature.

Instead, there is the rat race. The rush. The loss of Lahore's ancient relaxed ways and the intrusion of an alien culture is visible everywhere. Plastic things literally attack one's senses as one walks through Anarkali bazaar. There is so much plastic in the city that it seems to be drowned in it. Then there are the food joints. Lahorees' most favourite pastime is, of course, eating, and the latest rage is the food streets. Along with the Big Mac and so many other Western food outlets, there are the *desi karahi gosht* and the like. The most dramatic change, however, is the timeframe in which Lahore operates. Once it used to be city of early risers; now people sleep at 2 am and food streets are crowded well past midnight.

Lahore may have lost some of its traditional styles but its people remain distinctively Lahorees. Their frankness, direct and personal approach to everything is apparent in all their dealings. The onslaught of westernisation may be taking its toll, but Patras Bukhari would still say, *Lahore Lahore hai*.