

# A meanner existence

Life in the  
slums of  
Lahore has  
changed  
little over  
the years

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**W**alking in the streets of Khalid Park, Shafiqabad, one of the many squallors in the outskirts of Lahore, one is reminded of the slums of England in the mid 19th century depicted by Charles Dickens in his novels.

The very life is re-enacted here in Pakistan in the 21st century: dark, narrow streets littered with rubble of various sorts, donkey and horse carts blocking the bumpy path, and seemingly ignorant labourers working like beasts of burden with no respite. Health services and law and order are a problem here but not an issue.

This is their "*chhuti taem*" now (time to stop work and leave for home) as they call it in their jargon. The pungent smell of the plastic, burnt in factories in the recycling process, is in the air. Three bare

footed kids appear to have just left a factory as they enter a street. Their costume is greased and dirty. They do not stop to chat with me and run away from the place giggling, which incidentally happens to be near a factory. Perhaps the prospect of a voice calling them from inside the factory drives them away or may be they are surprised to see a stranger in the area.

This is what one may call the other side of Lahore, the backyard away from the glitz and glamour of city life. Here the amenities of a civic life are scarce. There is no dispensary

in the vicinity and not a single private practitioner. Two *dakter saebs* for an estimated population of more than 30,000 happen to be the compounders, only having a little more knowledge about medicine than a chronically ill patient.

"Only a few months back my elder brother opened this 'clinic' here," says a compounder at what appears to be a small druggist shop at Khalid Park. "We thought it will do a good business here. But it seems that people here do not believe in taking medicine to cure their disease," he says requesting me not to mention his name in the paper as he has not consulted his brother about the matter. "This is a strange place I tell you. People here just labour and labour all the time," he says. "There are some factories here where plastic is remoulded. The whole area stinks of plastic. I think it should stop or else the people's health will suffer," he says.

"This is a valid concern," says Aamir Siddiq, a doctor, commenting on the presence of the factories in the area. He has been treating patients in Shafiqabad in collaboration with an NGO. "The factories where they burn the plastic to remould it pose a serious health risk for the residents of the area. The smell which contains carbon and other toxic materials causes respiratory diseases including chest infection which can in the later stage develop into lung cancer if the patient remains in the same environment for a long period," he warns. "The immunity level of the people here

has decreased. The thick fumes coming out of the factory chimneys are nothing but death for the residents of the area," he says.

It is quite ironic though but workers in the factories think that there is nothing abnormal about the activity in the factories. "Whatever the conditions here we know that we're going to get some money at the end of the day. This is what is more important for us," says Barkat Ali, a teenager working in a factory which treats plastic.

The residents of the area think in no different terms. "Where can we go?" questions

with services like water and Sui gas. Nobody listens to us. These treatment plants should be moved somewhere else. But who is going to do that?" he asks.

Slums like Shafiqabad get nominal attention from the local government. "Perhaps this is for the first time that soling of the main streets is being undertaken," says Muhammad Saeed, a contractor, supervising work on the main street leading into Shafiqabad. "We have got a sixty lakh contract from the local government but this contract does not include all the

ing watch at night ourselves," says Zia Hussein, panshop owner of the area.

The SHO of the police post set up on the other side of the embankment, Anwar Saeed says that inadequate manpower; an SHO, one ASI and four constables, is the main reason why police finds it difficult to control crime in the area. "This post was set up some time back to control crime in Shafiqabad. Now I think another police post must be set up on the Shafiqabad side. You see there are so many problems," he points to the police post which has been set up at a godown being jointly used by a wholesale dealer of the waste. "We pay more than half of the rent from our own pockets," he says.

"The issue is nowhere near a settlement as the parties, the residents of Shafiqabad and the cottage industry owners, are pursuing their cases in the courts. Each one of them argue that they were the first ones to occupy the area," says Khwaja Hassaan, Nazim Data Ganj Bakhsh Town. "We on our part are doing whatever we can, like soling of the streets and making sure that the basic facilities reach them," he says. "We have only got the regular allocation from the city government, about 24 lakh a month, which goes into payment of salaries of the staff among other things," he says. But we are making plans to improve the living conditions of the people," he assures.

*World Habitat Day is celebrated annually on the first Monday of October.*

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Shiekh Fayyaz, a resident of the area running a bakery in a street. "We have got no alternative. Out there life is so expensive. I cannot afford a house on rent or a shop in a main market," he says, adding that the little money he earns from his bakery shop is hardly enough to afford him a living in the area. "We should be provided

streets of Khalid Park, only a few main ones," he says.

Not very different from the state of health services and other facilities is the security situation. "Incidents of thieves breaking into shops at night are becoming regular. First we had a plan to hire private 'chawkidars' but that required money. So we have begun keep-

By Ather Naqvi

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