

The last of the great tailors

Lahore Dawn 6.3.04

LAST week, the last of the 'great four' tailors of Lahore folded up business on The Mall, ending over a century and a half of tradition that made this city famous for its outfitters. A legal victory for the new Karachi-based building owner shut down two great old tailoring outfits, both former tailors and outfitters to the governor of the Punjab.

During the British era, Lahore had a galaxy of tailors and outfitters. These grand institutions catered for the entire dressing needs of the ladies and gents of the Raj in the "Poonjab plains". Among the leading shops was Ranken & Company, civil and military tailors. This concern was established in Calcutta in 1770, and was a branch of the famous Seven Tailors of Burberry, London.

After 1957 and the consolidation of the Raj, they moved to this most lucrative market. There were other shops, too, especially on The Mall. There was L. Richards & Co., drapers and outfitters, Messrs Ball, Moody & Co., civil and military tailors, then there was Phelps & Co., outfitters, and there was Mr Fillingham, a "tailor of class". Another leading 'tailor and outfitter' was Pitman & Co. Among the Muslims, the leading 'tailoring and outfitters' concern was Ismail & Co., and then there was, much later, the famous London House, tailors and outfitters, who were trained abroad.

Each tailor had his own way of handling clients. Some would charge extra for visiting clients at their homes or offices. In the old days 'house visits' were normal for these 'outfitters' had to stitch undergar-

ments. This was in the days before machine knitting arrived. Then there were concerns like Ranken, who offered the facility of "patterns forwarded upon application". The era of ready-made clothes had not arrived, and in a way it has still not fully arrived in Lahore, except for shirts and undergarments. To be honest, it has not even today arrived in London or Paris, where a gentleman is still known by the class of his tailor.

At the time of the partition of the Punjab, Lahore had four major 'tailors and outfitters', Ranken, Pitman, Ismail and London House. Ranken and Pitman continued for some time. The original English owners left Lahore in 1947, handing over business to their trusted ones. Pitman & Co. was handed over to their master cutter, who ran the business from its original location opposite the Assembly Chambers. Ranken & Co. also continued to operate and closed down some time in the 1970s. Then Pitman was ejected from its posh location and today the son of the cutter runs a small shop by the same name on Queens' Road. But then it is a shadow of its glorious past. This left just two major tailoring concerns on The Mall, they being Ismail & Co., and London House, tailors and outfitters. Last week, these two concerns closed as the new owner of the building that housed them for over a century evicted them. Haji Sahib of Ismail & Co., tailors and outfitters by appointment to the governor of the Punjab, decided to give up the trade. I visited him and he was heart-broken. He had decided not to

relocate, but just give up his business.

"Just imagine, the tailor of the governor is thrown out of his shop. I will not work again." An artist is an artist. I remember in the 1960s, he was known to be the best and most expensive tailor in the entire sub-continent. Once while passing in front of Ismail's shop with my late father, who was then the editor of the *Civil & Military Gazette*, my brother mentioned that Ismail & Co. charged Rs1,200 for our school blazer. At this the old man stopped and said: "Do you want a blazer each?" We agreed and got one each. He refused to let us have any complex.

But then there was London House, a concern run by Sheikh Amin, who had learned his trade 'abroad'. Most experts believed that he was a shade better than the other three 'big' tailoring houses. His son, Pervez, was also sent to learn this trade 'abroad', and he took up the tailoring business, while his brother ran the outfitters business in which he produced excellent leather shoes. When the case against the tenants of the building started, Pervez got the message loud and clear and brought a nice new shop on Queens' Road, keeping it for the day he was evicted. The brother who produced shoes "from the best leather" has moved to Defence, where he has set up shop.

Last week, when both Ismail & Co. and London House closed, it brought to an end over a century and a half of a grand tailoring and outfitting tradition. The building is up for sale and probably will be pulled down to construct another concrete monstrosity. But the only saving

grace to this sad saga is that London House has relocated to Queens' Road opposite the fire brigade hill in the basement of the huge new building there.

I visited it for old times sake and was pleasantly surprised to see that Mr Pervez has now set up an even better shop. I saw that his clientele had not diminished. When I put my 'trouser piece' on the oak table, he sauntered into the 'patterns' room and within a minute brought out my pattern. He measured me again and informed me that I had added two inches to the waist. The old pattern is still there for reference. I promised to lose those inches and he smiled to himself. He never did speak much. Just one glance at my contours and he has the complete measure of a 'gentleman'. Name any gentleman and he is his client. If they live abroad or outside Lahore, once here they drop in to get new clothes made.

He has a complete record of each client, when and what was made, supported with small clippings of each fabric used. He is a class act and no less than those 'greats' from Burberry. He learned his craft from his father and fine-tuned it in the best tailoring school of Europe. But like Rankin he does not send "patterns on application". He keeps his record, he draws each pattern himself, and as his old clients will testify, he only tries out clothes on new clients. The old ones know that he gets them right the very first time. In a way history has moved on. But it is nice to see that the best of them still remains a master craftsman in the finest tradition Lahore had to offer. — MAJID SHEIKH