

Lahore  
Dawn  
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# Remembering forgotten heroes

**L**AHORE has had its fair share of heroes, a few known, most forgotten and the vast majority unknown. As time passes, these heroes, having lived their moment of glory, are snuffed out ... a silent whimper for a last hurrah.

Last week while on the flight to Rome, which for some odd reason goes via Paris, I was sitting next to Muhammad Afzal. He belongs to a village near Gujrat. It seems that almost half a million Pakistanis, mostly from Gujrat, have migrated to Italy. They work in the tanneries, the smelting plants, in the automobile factories, on the land tilling the tough Italian soil to grow the choicest grapes for the finest wines, and olives and peaches. They work in the creameries making exquisite cheese, and they even inhabit the tough Sicillian landscape, competing with some very tough Sicillian characters. They speak the language reasonably well. In short, they are at home away from home.

Afzal works as a welder in a well-known Italian tractor factory near Bologna. He works 15 hours a day, six days a week and no holidays. The boss likes him and lets him keep the factory keys. We were discussing the agony of

being a migrant, and it was during this 11-hour long flight that I heard the story of Billu Butt and Akram Gujjar, both from inside the old walled city of Lahore. Billu Butt was killed at the age of 21 trying to cross the Swiss Alps on foot in the middle of the night. The other worked for a master leather craftsman in Florence, and he escaped to Germany, and, maybe, on to France and Spain. The story of Billu Butt and Akram Gujjar is typical of thousands of Pakistanis who leave our shores in search of a better life, and those earnings help to sustain the motherland, yet those rulers scorn at them. They are the wretched of the earth in a feudal landscape where pity and understanding for their plight is a sin, at least, officially, it is.

I managed to meet a Pakistani in Florence who pointed out the place where Akram Gujjar worked. I walked through the beautiful narrow streets of Florence, thinking of Lahore, and arrived at the church of Dante. Its called Casa di Dante. Just off it is Via Santa Margherita and a board outside a shop says "bottega artigiani del cuoio". It was here that Akram Gujjar learnt his craft. He initially worked at another workshop in the second street off the shop called

Via Del Corso. He was a master leather bookbinder. His gold-edged creations sold for almost 150 euros each, and Franco Cimatori paid him 20 euros for each piece. He would make about 20 pieces a week, and Akram made a name for himself.

His friend Billu Butt had always wanted to come to Italy, and so through an agent Billu set off. He landed at Yemen, crossed over to Sudan by boat, managed to cross the desert of camel in five weeks, and then spent ten days on a boat, almost dying of thirst in the middle of the sea that took him to Italy. There the local agent tried to kill him by firing at him. But Billu Butt had learnt his skills in the streets of old Lahore, and he escaped through sheer skill and guile. A week later he landed up outside the shop of his delighted friend Akram, who looked after him. Very soon he had his papers made and was working in a tannery. It was in the tannery that our passenger friend Afzal met him, and, so Afzal claims, he was more interested in going to Germany. That was his undoing.

An Italian agent arranged for him to cross into Switzerland at night along the rail track. Just as he had crossed over, the agent shot him in the back and

escaped into Italy. The incident had taken place in another country. The victim belonged to a far away place called Lahore. It was the end of the story as far as the Swiss or the Italians went, but the mother of Billu Butt had an address to write to. Very soon they realized that no answers were forthcoming. Even Akram Gujjar stopped writing after he informed his friends in Lahore that Billu had been shot dead in the Swiss Alps. In Mohallah Joggian they held a Quran khawani, and that is all they could do. He was one of many Pakistanis who perish so that hundreds can make it, and they slave away in search of a dream of a better life in Pakistan.

Akram Gujjar worked for three years in Florence, when one day he left. No one knows where he ended up. In the leather markets of Florence the bookbinders still remember him as a master craftsman whose works were sought after.

While on the flight to Rome I asked Afzal, who lives and works near Bologna, just how had he managed to make it to Italy. His story was also an amazing one. He flew to Turkey, took a boat and landed on the beach of Sicilly. From there he crossed over to Germany

after illegally crossing the border along the rail track at night. He in the same manner crossed over to France, went to Spain and then ended up in Italy. For five years he was an illegal immigrant, till such time as the law allowed him to register. He says he was fired at three times, and each time he lay still in the night till all danger had gone. The border guards came and left and missed him. This is the way hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis make their way across the continents, all in search of better lives. For them death is never far away. It is an unending tale of sheer guts and grit, an unrecorded portion of the migrants from Pakistan.

A week later when I touched down in dust-covered Lahore, I noticed the sheer arrogance of rich bureaucrats in expensive green number plate cars and vans being given special treatment by the police. It makes one think of the hundreds of thousands of poor people who slave away so far away from home, a status quo is maintained that remains unfair to them, the very breadwinners of our soil. There must be hundreds of Billu Butts and Akram Gujjars lying buried on alien soil, the forgotten heroes of our land. — **MAJID SHEIKH**