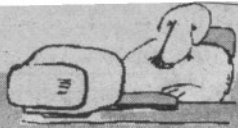


Over the top



Lahore
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Zoo story

The Lahore may be a success story commercially, but its hapless inmates are not getting their rightful share in the proceeds they are earning



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I was among five volunteers who worked in an honorary capacity with the Lahore Zoo for about three years. When our term ended recently, the Zoo authorities were more than delighted to see the last of us. We were never recalled, let alone thanked for whatever little we had managed to do. We were members of the ZMC - the Zoo Management Committee, which ostensibly has a large say in what happens or does not happen at the Lahore Zoo.

But our three years were full of frustration. We battled hopelessly against bureaucratic nonsense, fought miles and miles of red tape that prevented anything of substance from happening at the zoo and were able to achieve little to alleviate the suffering of the animals, who live out their existence at the whims of provincial and narrow-minded petty officials. The indifference to the plight of the animals was heartrending, as the only agenda that we witnessed was the making of money and more money, regardless of how a spate of commercial activities were playing havoc with the health and lives of the animals. It is a matter of shame that we were able to do very little for the animals, which was our primary reason for volunteering in the first place.

The Lahore Zoo is a commercial success story. The figures released with great pomp and puffed up chests are impressive. In July this year while the animals gasped for every breath in Lahore's monstrous humidity, no less than 261,386 people infested the Zoo. That's an amazing number of people, all paying the Rs 5 and Rs 10 fee that's mandatory for children and adults. In August, the Director Lahore Zoo blithely announced, the number went up to 317,661. In 2003, no less than 2.8 million people visited the Zoo. In 2004, it was already above that figure. The Zoo's earning is reportedly Rs 42 million against Rs 25 million expenses. The rest goes

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into the many bank accounts that the Zoo maintains gathering interest. The Zoo is a well-oiled, money-minting machine and while various contracts reportedly go for premium, behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing, the big time game at the Zoo is the pursuit of money. The animals are only the means to an end.

As the city's only zoo located within easy reach, the Zoo attracts a large number of people but it is not the ungodly busloads that arrive daily that disturbs, but the whole attitude of all those into whose hands the affairs of the Zoo have remained for long. Now under the Punjab Wildlife & Parks Department, the Zoo's entire philosophy needs drastic revision. Of the enormous resources it has - and it is totally self-sufficient and not reliant on the government for even a penny. The Zoo does not spend even a portion of what it makes, or keeps in fixed deposit bank accounts, on the primary reason they are in business - the animals. They have been left largely to fend for themselves, living and dying on the whims of the Grim Reaper up above and indifferent and incompetent officials down here. Thus while the Zoo management led by its business-minded director crows in delight over how much money they earn daily, when it comes to spending on animals there are suddenly huge obstacles that cannot be overcome. The broken monkey cages took months to get repaired - not replaced. The lion house has a roof that virtually does not exist and is infested with snakes, yet in the three frustrating years we were involved, we could not get the roof repaired. The bear house, a dark and dirty dungeon, which no self-respecting bear would tolerate under normal circumstances, was bad enough. The 'play' area that ran down to a stinking sewer (for the bears to frolic in, mind you) was entirely cemented, obviously the work of a demented sadist and placed there at the behest of the Zoo authorities. It took three years and far too many meetings to have the concrete broken and expose the mud. About the stinking gutter, we ended up doing nothing. While there were millions in unused bank accounts, there was no money for installing a running filtered water system through the bear house and for that matter, the rest of the zoo. The lions and tigers live packed into tiny holes. The tigers, loners by nature, are packed like sardines. The lions fare no better. These species, the pride and joy of the Zoo, have inter-bred to the extent that what we have are freaks - the white tigers, much touted about in the media, are albinos. This is a shame in itself and this aberration is passed off as an achievement! There are dozens and dozens of such examples.

There is money for a useless, misused sound system, a ten-camera surveillance system (who's coming? Osama Bin Laden?), multimedia projectors, et al, but no money for more vital needs. The animals are suffering from TB - it is spreading fast. A Red Deer died last month because of TB. More will die. A detailed programme, implemented despite grave resistance from the Zoo, for vaccination and

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Those who love animals are kept at arm's length and radical reforms, that are the crying need of the hour, cannot be put into place unless enlightened people at the top stop sleeping and step in before more animals die. This is the least that the city administration must do. The Chief Secretary should appoint a 100% independent, fearless and competent body to probe the Zoo's murky affairs. He should do this for those who cannot speak for their rights.