

Grouting Lahore's history in its reality

FROM time to time every human being, or a collection of them, stop to reassess themselves. So it is with the people of a city, even a country, let alone a continent, like Europe is doing at the moment. It seems that a time has come for the people of Lahore, steeped in colourful folklore as it is, to assess just how they see themselves in history, and, most importantly, as part of the rest of the world.

All these are lofty thoughts, heavy enough to break a man's back. But as we have, over the last half a century, been through a very heavy dose of religious 'realignment', we find ourselves at odds with the rest of the world. Why are we lost? Have we forgotten our history, of who we were and what we are today? The answer, in my view, is a definite 'Yes'. The problem lies, probably, in the fact that we have imposed on ourselves a set of blinkers, trying to cut out the reality that our forefathers have been through. Why deny the fact that we have been ruled for almost 1,000 years by foreign invaders, all of them, almost religiously in the metaphorical sense, dedicated to looting and looting alone. The people have only been pillaged. Starting from Mahmud of Ghazni in AD 997 right down to when on the 14th of August in 1947, we rid ourselves of our British masters, we have been ruled by foreigner looters. The only exception being the wayward Punjabi Sikhs, who ruled for 50 years starting 1799 till 1849 in the Lahore Darbar. The ruler within was greater. In a way, even today, to the poor our

rules are still foreign. This is the reality of our forefathers.

Poet Faiz put it best when he said that everything that exists is our culture, which reflects our history. Let us narrow down this to how we are trying to conduct ourselves as a city. We are changing the names of roads and buildings and gardens with such abandon, as if it will help us rid ourselves of the shame of being ruled by foreigners. It never works like that in the real world.

In this brief piece let us stick to the names we use, for this is a topic that needs reams of paper to just state the problem, let alone seek answers. My late father always kept reminding me to "stick to the concrete, not the abstract." Probably he read too much Fowler, but what he did definitely instil in us was the essential use of remaining simple, using words only when they were barely essential. Being flamboyant and verbose was being vulgar, and what a frown he would have on his face when we tried a long and difficult word.

My favourite example is the Jinnah Garden of Lahore. Now where is that you will ask. It is the old Lawrence Gardens. That makes better sense to a Lahori, the older among them who still call the place Company Bagh. Now this has a history. This garden was built by the East India Company, and then claimed that they would plant every known botanical species on Earth in this garden. The Government College, Lahore, in collaboration with the Botanical Gardens of the University of

Cambridge took on this project. It made ample sense and instilled in Lahore a sense of pride, in being interested in research and experimentation. It remains, even today, a beautiful idea.

After 1857 and the realignment of British policy in the Punjab, the name of Lawrence was known to each and every Lahori. He was a man who had a special soft corner for Lahore, and it was after the Company gave way to direct rule by the Crown that this garden was named Lawrence Gardens. The objective remained the same, to have the world's finest botanical garden, an objective long forgotten. Incidentally, Government College's Botanical garden still exists between Lawrence Garden and the Lahore Zoo. For almost 98 years the name stuck, and then came 1947 and in a frenzy to rename everything it was officially called Jinnah Garden, not that Mr Jinnah desired so, for it happened after the old man had left us to our own devices.

Given such a history, it is a fact that the people of Lahore still call it Lawrence Garden. Some even call it Company Bagh. Does it make sense to revert to Lawrence Garden? My view is that it should, and that the history of the name of the garden should be written at different places within the garden. It is time that the reality of the garden is grouted in the reality of history, not in the narrow emotive moment when such decisions were made. I am confident Mr Jinnah would not feel small by the act, but happy that we are confident enough to

take a bold decision.

Let us give a few other examples. I was testing my soul mate over names. "What is the real name of Abbott Road?" It drew a blank. Well it is Nawab Iftikhar Husain Mamdot Road. Imagine, would any self-respecting Lahori ever call Abbott Road (of 'tak-tak' fame) by any name but Abbott Road. Lest one does not know, Abbott was a British administrator who planned and built a lot of the infrastructure that is modern day Lahore. Surely we do not hate those who built for us. Yes he was a foreigner, but then were not all the other rulers over the last 1,000 years. Just for the record Abbott sanctioned more mosques than did Ahmad Shah Abdali and some very beautiful ones.

For those living in Gulberg and Defence, if one was to ask them the present name of Jail Road, I am sure 99.9 per cent would be stumped. It is Ghousul Azam Road. Just who would ever call Jail Road by such a name. Then there is Egerton Road, whose official name is Khalifa Shujaiddin Road. As I know the Khalifa family of Lahore well, I mean no disrespect, but surely even the old man would disapprove of such a change. Do we know enough about Egerton today? No, we do not, and that is a shame, and that is why educating the people of Lahore about the people those names adorn our streets and lanes and boulevards is essential. We need to return to reality.

We all do know the names of Abbot, Beadon, Brandreth, Cooper, Durston, Egerton, Hall,

Lawrence, McLeod, McLagan, Nicholson and scores of other such persons. Should not the names of the roads also have small reminders of the history of the persons whose names are used for the road. If any, it will bind us to our roots. As Lahore expands, the newer roads can definitely adorn names such as Bahadur Yar Jung, or Jamaluddin Afghani, or Sir Muhammad Shah. The great men in our history, irrespective of whether they came from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, England, France, Uzbekistan, all deserve respect. But we must explain the history of every road, every lane, ever mohallah, every crossing, every turn and bend in our history to our children. We owe it to them. This will give our history a context people can see in the concrete, not an abstract idea of knights in shining armour.

There is a need to define our history, the history of Lahore in the concrete, and there is no need to feel ashamed of what we have been through, for the entire educated world knows about it anyway. Let us own up to the antics of Babar burning and pillaging Lahore by calling the arch way inside Kattarh Maulvian by his name, with a history of the incident. Every street and road has a history. We need to tell it. Faiz put it so aptly about Lahore: "Under every brick in Lahore is a story, a story that goes back in time. Our culture goes back into antiquity. Everything we have is our culture." —

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