

# Lahore's annual pigeon flying contest

By Majid Sheikh

THERE he stood, a sharp razor in hand ... the barber had come to circumcise my two younger brothers. They caught one and did the needful, but Abdul Karim was one not to be caught. Like baby Tarzan he swung through the trees and disappeared on the roof of our Masson Road house. Two days later, he was discovered actually living with his pigeons ... much to my mother's relief.

He always was different. He loved his pigeons and he loved his kites and he loved my father. But circumcision was an issue that had to be tackled and a week later Abdul Karim was trapped, snapped and "chotay Sheikh Sahib" was wrapped in a cute little bandage. My brother proudly touted you know what. But his pigeons came first. Almost 40 years later they still come first, and he is considered an authority on the subject ... only now they call him "Nanajee" in the walled city, and he sets the rules by which the pigeon experts, all over Lahore, contest their 'championship' every year. He was very young, in class five, when my father died and he just ran away from home and was mostly found on the old man's grave talking to it. He

never came home, much to my mother's anguish. This was over 30 years ago. But she always knew that either he was with his pigeons, talking to them, or he was with his father, talking to him. Getting him out of the walled city proved impossible. He still thinks all of us are odd balls living in funny houses without character, or with people who do not love or care for one another.

His subject is pigeons. He claims they actually understand the sensitivities of their masters, their moods, their disposition. The variety of pigeons is staggering but that would be too technical a subject. But what most people do not know is that Lahore has had a pigeon-flying contest every year, and this, so the story goes, has been going on for almost as far back as history. There is a mention of it in the Vedas with reference to the hamlet of Lahu where pigeons flocked. There is mention of it in almost every story concerning the sending of messages, be they of war or of the peaceful pursuit of love. In fact, wherever humans dwell, the peaceful pigeon dwells too. The beauty of this relationship is that never does any hatred for the bird ever come into the

picture.

When partition took place, the annual contest for a few years acquired a strange twist. It was taking place in Lahore and Amritsar at the same time, and a certain Mr Ram Das supervised it, most probably of the *Das kulcha* family. But bureaucracy has a strange way of snuffing out the best in us humans. The line of hatred soon took over and the contest was reduced to a Lahore-only affair. Pigeon flying has its fanatics, too, depending on who is describing them. But the annual affair is one that needs to be described, so that its immense grip on the people of the walled city can be understood better.

The tournament area of the Lahore Pigeon Flying Contest consists of Shahalami, Bhati, Lohari, New Anarkali, Old Anarkali, Hindu Camp, Sabzi Mandi, Yadgar, Maalipura, Sanda, Chohan Road, Sant Nagar, Krishan Nagar and Bilal Ganj. This is the area that consists of where the 'real Lahoris' live, the ones who stick to their old ways ... or at least this is what they themselves believe. From a historical point of view, these are the areas that were inhabited when the British took control of things, and this

is where pigeon flying has been, mostly, confined. Now more about the contest.

The rules have not changed, so the experts claim, for the last 200 years. There is no need for a change. Pigeon lovers register, for a small fee, themselves as contestants. Once their 'adda', or pigeon station, is registered, a neutral judge is appointed for that 'adda'. So strong is the tradition of fairness that even real brothers will not bend the rules for each other. It is a bond of fairness that has been developed among pigeon lovers over the centuries, and the character of the old Lahoris comes out so magnificently. They say that they are judging the pigeons, not the owners, and that Allah would never forgive them if they were unfair to such a peaceful bird. This brotherhood is an amazing one in this age of match fixing, which certainly is not cricket as we know it.

When the contest begins, the over 100 'addas' release five pigeons each. Imagine over 100 judges all judging fairly at the same time. The owner of each 'adda' is called an 'ustad', and one can only enter after the tournament committee makes sure that the pigeon 'adda' has been around for at

least three years, which is the time it takes for birds to never want to leave their home. If the selected pigeons do not want to fly in the contest from their own home, the rules allow the owner to release them from another registered 'adda', allowing him the chance to take part. But if the birds fly straight home, as a few do, then they are not considered competition grade. In such circumstances, the 'ustad' is the butt of jokes for the rest of the year. So competition pigeons are no joke, lest the naive among us should think it is not serious stuff.

The determining factor is the time a pigeon takes to fly continuously, and the winner is treated just like a champion racehorse is. Pigeon lovers try their best to get chicks sired by the champion pigeon. It is a world all its own, and one that is increasingly looked upon as a waste of time by people who have no understanding of the world of birds, and the tradition of pigeon flying in Lahore.

Just to give you a flavour of the names of the leading 'ustads' of Lahore. There is Ustad Aachi alias Bucklewala, who is a known expert of champion pigeons. Then there is Imtiaz Pehalwan alias Sheeshaywala, b

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it Kaka Kassai Derbywala, Pir Arif,  
e Khalifa Munawwar, and then there is  
o the delightful name of Ustad Billo  
n Kanta, after whose name it is essential  
e that one says "on who's feet everyone  
r kneels" if you are to elicit an answer  
e from him. Then there is Nanajee. A  
y few contestants fly in from the US  
y every year, like Syed Iftikhar Shah  
alias Boss Chaudhry Amerikawalay.  
s He is a pigeon fanatic and says that he  
e dreams only of pigeons in the US.  
o Another one is Shafiq Pappa, MPA.  
l There are contestants from the  
Frontier, from Sindh, from  
Balochistan, and also from other  
Punjab cities.

It is, like Basant, a festive day in  
Lahore, only people who do not  
understand pigeons do not notice it.  
The best thing is that they do not  
bother anyone, or cause traffic stop-  
pages .. for they are at peace with  
themselves. I can imagine my brother  
reading this piece and worrying lest  
the curse of commercialism should hit  
his love. So he is best left alone ... the  
man and his pigeons, and I am sure  
my father will not be turning in his  
grave over what his dear son still  
loves. By now he has probably talked  
him out of it.