

Barber shops, a useful institution

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THE Walled City, is known for some of the enduring traditions they have evolved over the centuries. In addition to their uncommonly strong proclivity for learning and practising such fine arts as music, paintings, calligraphy and street theatre, they have a keen interest in national and international politics. To the surprise of many scholarly individuals, some of the opinions expressed by these "churlish" citizens on matters both mundane and spiritual carry much weight.

One of the most frequented places in the old city, where anything under the sun, is discussed, are the barbers salons located almost in every bazaar, street and mohalla. At these crowded places, matters such as ever-rising prices, utility services, police encounters with the criminals and the general crime situation in the country, minor scandals in the vicinity and social event of any consequence are debated. Not too long ago, there used to be a chain of hamams (hot baths) of the Mughal and Sikh eras, where people used to gather of an evening, especially in winter, to gossips and also to ponder over matters that affected the well being of the people. With the exception of a few, a majority of these hamams does not exist any more.

Next in importance are the *tharras* (projection or shop extensions), where people sit for hours to express their highly personalized opinions on current international events and national politics.

After dinner, a larger number of senior residents of the Walled City get out of their homes to discuss politics in the hairdressers' shops, where newspapers and hookahs where fresh tobacco is available for free. Visitors, who are in need of haircuts or shaves, are obliged promptly. While the khalifa (barbers are generally called khalifas) is busy doing his job, he also initiates a discussion on a certain (current) topic of the day, inviting others to offer their opinions in an environment which is generally characterized by respectful informality. Often, one finds a number of

visitors to these salons listening with rapt attention and in pin-drop silence to the views expressed by an enlightened citizen or someone reading a newspaper to them.

A majority of the visitors to barber's salons comprises superannuated people, who don't have anything else to do in the evening and have lots of time to while away. Included among them, sometimes, are one or more educated individuals, who authoritatively participate in the discussion in a manner that impresses others. Their views on current national and international affairs or events are considered authentic and accepted by the less educated or illiterate visitors to the salons.

Sometimes, these discussions get heated as arguments for and against a particular issue are presented and debated. Several decades ago, when I used to live inside the historic Mochi Gate, I would also visit a barber's shop in my locality in the evening, which was one of the most frequented shops in those days, and witnessed the debate between two contesting parties. I must say that here was a lot of folk wisdom in those open debates, which provided enough food for thought to the educated people, who happened to be there.

Irrespective of the level or quality of these discussions, one thing is quite clear. The so-called uneducated or churlish among the residents of the Walled City, who often contribute to these lively debates, are politically alive, and mentally alert. Observations made by them can even surprise knowledgeable observer of the political scene. Some among these "boorish" people would articulate their points of view in such a manner as would become the envy of the educated.

If on occasions the discussion bogs down, the agile khalifa will interject with the expertise of a seasoned moderator changing the tone, tenor and direction of the debate, or mediate between the two "warring" groups among the visitors to his shop.

However, this would happen only when the comments made by the participants are judged to be sub-standard and there is not a single "enlightened" person in the salon. The khalifa will then assume the role of a moderator and often succeed in preventing the situation from getting out of hand.

Entering Mochi Gate from Circular Road one finds dozens of barbers' shops dotting the landscape of this part of the Walled City. From this point of entry into the Walled City to Chauhatta Mufti Baqir and on to Bazaar Siriaanwala (on the left), and Chawk Purani Kotwali (on the right), most of these shops are often crowded by people, who are engaged in lively discussions, especially in the winter evenings, which echo their sentiments and opinions in an environment that is both pleasant and conducive to a meaningful conversation. In some hair-dressing salons *angeethis* (charcoal-fired open heaters) are also arranged by the owners of the salons, primarily for the comforts of the clients, to fight the cold. Other visitors, mainly hangers-on, who don't require the services of the barber, also benefit from this facility.

Prima facie, hair dressing salons located in the Walled City like those I have mentioned here do not mean much to those citizens who have not visited them. But in practical terms, they provide a useful community service. Whether one believes it or not, they serve as a training institution for ambitious citizens, who get their first lessons in social intercourse and thus are groomed for assuming responsibilities of the basic or first-tier leaders. One does not find a parallel of this institution in the many posh localities, which have sprung up in metropolitan Lahore during the past five decades. Perhaps, in some of these new urban areas, one bumps into a talkative khalifa in one of the many fashionable salons or parlors that have been set up in some of these new colonies.