

The horse and the 'nakkaskhana'

Lahore 16-3-02 By Majid Sheikh

BEFORE the internal combustion engine overtook our lives, existence in the Walled City of Lahore had two basic paces ... human and equestrian. Today, a variety of speeds, smells and sounds exist ... pleasant, neutral and some downright obnoxious.

We all tend to forget the immense contribution of the horse to life as we know it today. It would be interesting to see how the horse contributed to life in the Walled City over the last 1,000 years. Let us begin, as Lewis Carroll suggested, from the beginning. For me the beginning is how my father made me see the world and, more importantly, the ancient city in which our ancestors have lived over the centuries. He once took us to the Wazir Khan mosque. There he made us two brothers stand and close our eyes. "Imagine yourself in the times of the Mughal emperors, caravans from Samarkand stand before you in the courtyard outside this mosque, and beautiful horses stand all over. Merchants are selling all kinds of exotic ware. It is truly a bazaar of the East. Imagine. Imagine and then slowly open your eyes". The effect was magical. I can still feel that thrill of the courtyard today.

If you stand in the open space outside the Wazir Khan mosque, you can well imagine how life was then. Certainly a few major changes have taken places like plastic water-piping

and plastic goods can be seen, as well as bicycles and motorcycles all over the place. But if you look hard enough, you can actually see where the horses stood and there is a beautiful water trough for the animals even today. Here stand tongas as they have stood for hundreds of years, and the lanes and 'mohallahs' are still named after the horse.

The area just outside is known as the 'nakkaskhana', or the horse house, for here once stood a huge horse stable where horses were rested. A small portion of that 'nakkaskhana' still exists, only claimants in the 1947 deluge of refugees overtook it. The entire area to the east of the mosque is known as Mohallah Nakkas, or the Horse Mohallah. This is still a wide road on both sides of which people brought their horses to be sold. However, just outside Akbari Gate, which is where the road leads, was a very large ground, and this was known, and is still known, as 'Nakkas Mandi.' No horses are sold there today, but this is where the largest horse market of the Punjab once existed.

Just opposite it is the Landa Bazaar, which came up just as the Sikh period was drawing to a close, and here the huge havelis or palaces of the horse traders existed. With time these havelis were demolished to make way for commercialization. Eventually, with British imperialism creaming away our national wealth, the condition of the poor grew from bad to worse, and a huge secondhand clothes and shoes market sprang up. This is not only still thriving, but growing as actual poverty grows.

The condition of the horses was of paramount importance to the rulers. Be

it the Mughals, the Sikhs or even the British, it seems that the welfare of the horse was a very important aspect of governance. The Sikhs appointed 'nakkas santris' who went round all over the city inspecting the physical condition of horses. One account, as quoted in the delightful book published by the Fakir family on "The Real Ranjit Singh," tells of how a man, who ruthlessly beat up his horse, was whipped publicly in the 'nakkaskhana' for one hour and made to sit with a blackened face backwards on the same horse, a lesson to others on how important the horse was to the Maharajah. An old saying in the Walled City even today describes being striped for striping a horse.

The British added to such punishment with even stricter checking, and adding a 15-day jail sentence as part of the law. Today it is common to see old wounded animals being beaten mercilessly and overloaded till they actually are left dangling in the air. The sad part is that today people actually laugh at such a situation, a sad reflection of the society we have become. It is hard to imagine that the horse, that favourite animal of our Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), is degraded and mistreated by a people whose ancestors prided in producing the speediest breed of horses in the Punjab.

The entire track from Akbari Gate curving round near Mochi Gate and going on towards Bhati Gate was one long race track, where soldiers and kings raced and played polo and other games on horseback. The famous "Slave Emperor" of India, Qutabuddin Aibak, died from a horsefall just outside Lahori Gate and is buried there. It was Mr ZA Bhutto who ordered that a tomb befitting the emper-

or be built on his modest and ignored grave in a small room in an insignificant and hidden house. But everywhere you look inside the Walled City, you will find traces of the contribution of the horse to our lives.

What is important today is for us to get together and honour the horse and his contribution to life in Lahore as we know it today. The old water troughs must not be knocked down in the name of development, or to make way for yet another ugly concrete structure. The old 'nakkaskhana' stables, now occupied by dozens of claimants, must be renovated and converted into a museum honouring the horse. The outer gardens of the Walled City, or the few that remain, must have their horse tracks restored and, perhaps, used as jogging tracks.

But as Lahore is a living museum with a history over not centuries, but thousands of years, there is a need to control what has replaced the horse. Today exceptionally noisy rickshaws ply inside the silent lanes, making life miserable. Secluded as it might seem, the passing of a rickshaw means that people in the same room cannot hear one another talk. Such is the misery of those living inside the Walled City. Just because they are very poor people, our system does not cater to their needs.

In another piece we talked of the famous horses of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, and how he waged a war with Afghanistan just to secure a horse, and how the dust was settled in the city so that the nostrils of the magnificent animal were not polluted. But then times have changed, only we are going towards disaster with both our eyes open, unlike the one-eyed Maharajah of the past.