

Frightening a smile out of the unsuspecting

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LAST week while walking through the Walled City, from out of the blue, from a narrow lane, rushed a crazed man, blood streaming from his face, his tongue red with gore, ash splashed on his filthy face, his attire in rags as if just out of a fight, a huge shining sword in his hand and fierce bloodshot eyes. He came straight for me, screaming, swinging his sword and yelled "Ya Ali" in a frenzy as if to strike me straight on the skull. That split second was frightening.

But as I have experienced such weird scenes many times in my youth, I shouted back fiercely and very loudly and the man stopped in his track, amazed, surprised and a bit embarrassed. The onlookers had a hearty laugh and the crazed man mellowed down immediately and asked for a rupee, which I made ten, for I wanted to talk to him for my column. Had in my place been my dainty daughters, brought up and raised in this 'burger age' as I teasingly refer to, they would have died of shock. The man was a "behrupia", an institution that the younger generation knows very little about.

The word means a 'disguised man,' and that he surely is. His tactic is to frighten the wits out of an unsuspecting person, for besides a pathetic story or a soul-wrenching tale, or even humour for that, fright is one way of begging. But then the traditional 'behrupia' of old Walled City mixes the humour of frightening people, if you could call it humour, to make a living. The 'behrupia' I got hold of was an interesting person, and his story is worth telling.

Muhammad Aslam lives in one of the numerous streets that shoot off Ravi Road near the Timber Market. Son of a tailor of the area, he went to school like any other child and then joined a government department as a peon. There he did not like the work and left to try his hand at a number of trades, but each time he found that the work was boring. Being a frequent visitor to the shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh, he soon discovered that it was easy to live off his wits, and after having his fill of food, all he needed was some money to buy his smokes and other little things, apart from providing money at home. That is when he met his 'ustad', a 'behrupia' of long standing, who taught him the art of extracting money.

Extracting money from a Lahori is no mean task. The softened up population living on the outskirts is easy prey, for they have enough to spare and perhaps they also feel they have done their 'good deed for the day' by paying a poor man, or at least so they think. I know of an old

woman beggar in Gulberg who owns two buildings in the Canal Park area and has sent her girls to college. Just like the beggar outside the Mayo Hospital gate, sitting there on a contract from the police, spends his time in the evening dressed in very fine clothes at a Bhati Gate restaurant eating the best meals possible.

But the 'ustad' of Muhammad Aslam had learnt his trade from his 'ustad' and so the tradition goes on. The first trait is to learn the art of make up, and this takes some doing. Aslam took me home and cleaned his face, and he was a nice handsome chap, and spoke an impressive dash of English. Once clean and 'normal', for I was beginning to doubt as to what was normal, he set about mixing a red pigment dye in water and added a bit of home-made glue to the mixture. This he very skillfully poured on his forehead and then looking in a mirror distributed it in flows all over his face. He would swing his face round and round and make the blood-coloured water run in every direction.

Next came the ash from a cloth bag. He burns newspapers, God bless his soul, and reduces them to ash and just puts them in this bag. From here he pulls out a fistful and skillfully "ashes up" his face and hair. On his tongue, he prepares himself a 'paan' with extra 'katha' and this he eats plenty of while plying his trade. The clothes he has set aside and they also get a liberal dose of ash before he sets off every day.

The trick is to creep up behind an inno-

cent person and frighten him, and then immediately ask for money. Sometimes people actually run away. Children, he says, can be dangerous for they tend to freeze in fright, so they are immediately let alone. But women tend to scream and often they are the ones who also get aggressive. But the average Lahori has a good laugh and gives money not out of pity, but just because the laugh is worth it. He says the original 'behrupia' was actually a comic act, and in circuses all over the sub-continent they played an important role bringing people to the arena. With the death of the circus, well almost, these comics managed to make ends meet by taking to the streets. But that is not the whole truth.

The role of the 'behrupia' has its origins in history. They have been mentioned as having existed in Mughal times, and during the era of the Sikhs they are said to have been used by the secret police to gather information. This use was continued even during the British days and beyond. Aslam says that he has nothing to do with the police, but then as the police are involved with beggars and other criminals, there is the possibility that they are used for intelligence gathering too. Seems a reasonable thing to assume.

During the Raj, the 'behrupia' was banned for a number of years as being a threat to the mental health of the population. But the tradition of the 'behrupia' lives.