



THE Lahore railway station. — Dawn

Memories

Lahore By Zaheer Mahmood

LAHORE, May 31: Synonymous with transition, the fort-like structure of the Lahore railway station stands as solidly as it did in 1860 when the first train was run from here, to Amritsar. From the ordinary wayfarer to the immigrant to the train marchers, strikers and even a Hollywood film unit, the station has seen them all with the grace and aloofness of an unaffected patriarch. Deep inside, though, there are signs of crumbling.

Lahore 194

Some destinations are no more on the schedule chart of the station master of Lahore while many new ones have been added. Thousands of commuters used to embark around two dozen express, mail and passenger trains daily at Lahore for places like Amritsar, Jallundhar, Ludhiana, Bombay (now Mumbai) and Delhi before August 1947. Now only one train operates twice a week to carry 2,000 or so people to Delhi.

s junction

ahmood Siddiqui

h Around 100 trains leave Lahore for
e north-western, western and southern des-
s tinations like Peshawar, Karachi and
n Quetta. Some 100,000 people visit the rail-
y way station daily on average and this num-
n ber considerably increases on weekends
d and around holidays.

ll The surroundings have altered alto-
f- gether. According to Sardar Gurbachan
Singh who was around 10
years old when he left
Lahore in 1947: "The
tonga stand near the rail-

1947-2007

a- way bridge had a big haudi (water tank)
w for horses and mules. But the animals did-
n- n't deter us from taking a dip in the tank
n in the summers," he recalls in a talk with
at Dawn recently while he was on his first
r, visit to the city of his birth since partition.

w The road in front of the main verandah
7. or lobby of the station was not so wide and
k

Continued on Page 19

Memories junction

Continued from Page 17

the number of motorvehicles on it could be counted on one's fingers. The ground in front of the main verandah had a number of shady trees and there were not so many buildings in the vicinity.

"My father told me that he spent a whole night under a tree near Rivoli Cinema to get a ticket for 'Barsaat'. I watched the first film of my life, Dilip Kumar's 'Aan', at Rivoli which is no more," the septuagenarian, who now lives in Haryana, says.

There were only three approaches to Singhpura — the birthplace of Mr Gurbachan: the railway overhead bridge and the Aik and the Do Moria pulis or bridges. The new underpass near the Aik Moria Pul confused him when he was going to Singhpura as did the nearby hide market.

"One thing has changed inside the station. In my childhood the coolies used to smoke beeri and hugga but now they have cigarettes dangling from their fingers," Gurbachan says and gives a big hug to this reporter in reciprocation of the affection showered on him during his Lahore yatra. "The city of Lahore has changed, Lahoris have not. They are as loving as ever."

It took the British only ten years after the annexation of Punjab to lay the foundation of the Lahore railway station. The ceremony was performed by Lt-Governor of Punjab Sir John Lawrence in 1859. It was literally the first purpose-built British imperial structure that represented the typical grand British architecture in the subcontinent. Since the British were in the habit of documenting minutest

details, there is no difference of opinion among historians such as Kanhaya Lal and Syed Muhammad Lateef as to the amount spent on its construction. They tell us that the structure cost half a million rupees.

Quoting its architect, William Burton, the historians say the station had a 'defensive character' to it so that "a small garrison could secure it against enemy attack."

William Dalrymple, the author of the 'White Mughals' and 'The Last Mughal', writes about Lahore railway station in his inimitable style: "With its great round bastions and tall machicolated towers, the Lahore station building seems to be the product of some short-lived collaboration between the Raj and the Disney Corporation, but it was in fact built in deadly earnest. The twin towers look as innocent as Swiss cuckoo clocks, but they were designed to be bomb-proof, while the loopholes across the facade are not the mock arrow slits they appear to be, but placements for Maxim guns, which were drawn down carefully designed lines of fire. Even the cavernous train sheds could, in an emergency, be sealed with huge sliding metal doors, turning the whole complex into a colossal fortified bunker."

The station was built by department of public works contractor Muhammad Sultan in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. So the building was deliberately designed to function both as a station and as a fort. At the time one of the major concerns was the safety of railway employees, and accordingly, the building was designed to provide accommoda-

tion for refuge of the railway staff and others in any time of danger.

The station had eight platforms and several waiting rooms for passengers. No new platform has been added to the station. Of the five overhead bridges, three are still used by passengers to go from platforms number 1, 2 and 3 to number 4 to 8. A fourth bridge that was used by railway employees as workshop has been closed down while a fifth one that connected Garhi Shahu Chowk to GT Road was reconstructed during the reign of Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif.

The 'fort' played an important role during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878). It facilitated the passage of as many as 75 trains every 24 hours to carry troops and provisions to the war destination.

M Saeed recalls in his 'Lahore - A memoir': "A place as frequented as a railway station leaves many impressions. The most outstanding in my case are the arrivals of the Simon Commission and the Amir of Bahawalpur, the coming of Nehru for the Congress session and of Ali Brothers for the League session — and then the Quaid's arrival."

Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah along with Madri-Millat Mohtarima Fatima Jinnah arrived at the Lahore station on March 21, 1940, for the All-India Muslim League meeting at the then Minto Park during which the Pakistan Resolution was adopted.

Wali Mazhar writes in his 'Azeem Quaid, Azeem Tareekh - Aik Haqeeqat, Aik Dastaveez,' that hundreds of thousands of people greeted the Quaid when he alighted from the special

coach of the Frontier Mail.

Not all memories of the railway station are pleasant. There were and maybe many who shunned the railway station for it reminded them of coaches filled with dead bodies coming from Amritsar in 1947.

But as passages quoted above indicate, the station represents one platform common to politicians of all shades and creed. If three and half decades ago, it played host to thousands of red-capped comrades setting out to Toba Tek Singh to listen to Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani, in the 1990s, it saw off Nawaz Sharif onwards with his train march.

Journalist Abdul Qadeer Rashk writes about a 1953 incident in his 'Yadon Kay Chiragh,' when the station, instead of being thronged by Leaguers to greet Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, was heavily populated by policemen. The then IGP, KM Husain got upset when he saw Rashk and fellow journalists Hameed Hashmi and Abdur Rashid Gilani.

"The IGP was reluctant to allow us to see the prime minister, but the prime minister saw the police blocking our way and came to us. Later on in the evening, we came to know through special newspaper supplements that a conspiracy to topple the government of the Nawabzada had been unearthed and Gen Akbar, Sajjad Zaheer and Faiz Ahmad Faiz had been arrested."

At another place in the book he narrates: "Passing through the Garhi Shahu Bridge during the Khatm-i-Nabuwat Movement in 1953, I saw some miscreants uprooting the rail track. I had

hardly reached the railway station when I heard an announcement being made from a military vehicle that martial law and curfew had been imposed by Gen Azam Khan."

Mr Rashk's reference to tracks and railway lines when he recalls the imposition of a martial law in Lahore is reminiscent of the use of trains and rails as symbols of movement and stoppages in writings and in films the world over. Lahore railway station went one step further when it played someone else in a Hollywood film.

The year was 1954. The signs 'Lahore railway station' were temporarily changed to facilitate a Hollywood film crew to shoot certain outdoor sequences of a historical film 'Bhawani Junction'.

During the independence movement, some Congress workers lay down over rail tracks to protest the British rule and its policies in the then undivided India. Since the incident took place at 'Bhawani Junction' India, Hollywood wanted to shoot the scene at the same place.

The then Indian government did not allow the shooting and consequently, the filmmakers contacted the Pakistan government and got from it an assurance of all-out cooperation. The Hollywood team chose the Lahore railway station to film the scenes.

The ambience is no more and a film unit seeking to recapture the old today would need to do much more than just cover up the Lahore railway station sign-board. Two fast food chains have been allowed to open their outlets on platform No 2 — the only other 'meaningful' addition of

recent been the installation of water coolers at various platforms.

Now only the railways officers and VVIPs have the privilege of getting off in the main verandah and parking their vehicles nearby. The parking lot for ordinary people is situated 200 metres away from the main lobby.

Gone are the days when toilets inside the railway station were usable. Heaps of garbage, broken utensils and running water pipes have made these calls by nature impossible to attend to. The only usable toilet is in the VIP waiting room to which, to the satisfaction of the vengeful ordinary people, even senior officers at the railway station have no access.

One has to come out of the railway station and walk 100 to 150 metres either to the right or the left to be able to use the facilities set up by a contractor — on an advance payment of Rs5. Rats impersonating the size and gait of cats can be seen freely roaming on the rail tracks, especially after sunset. An official campaign to kill at sight has failed to rectify the problem.

All entry and exit points are manned and incoming passengers are browsed and their luggage is checked with metal detectors, after a bomb blast somewhere in the country.

But all is not lost and a renovation is being planned with the cooperation of the archaeology department as the structure is a protected monument under section 3 (1) of the Punjab Special Premises (Preservation) Ordinance 1985. Everyone is hoping that it is going to be a restoration and not a reconstruction in this case.