

Disturbing the dead

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30-12-01

Florists Kiosks / graveyards

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HERE can be no two opinions that life is grave business. It is often literally and dreadfully so for both the living and the dead. An incident on Eid-ul-Fitr brutally drove home this point.

Followers of almost every religion have a tradition of remembering the dead on religious festivals to pay them homage and possibly also to remind themselves of the inevitability of the end. A visit to the graveyard should actually be treated as previewing conditions for the final shifting to one's permanent residence.

Muslims across the world have maintained the tradition of calling on their ancestors. In Pakistan, we do this flamboyantly, like a lot else. Graveyards are so filled with

cial crops, in response to the requirements of citizens who are expressing their affection for the living and the departed near and dear ones more and more with flowers.

The demand of citizens and availability of fresh flowers has resulted in the setting up of innumerable florists whose variety of flowers and wide range of colours has added an aesthetic dimension to Lahore. Many such outlets are to be seen at local graveyards, too.

Florists' kiosks around graveyards restrict themselves to marigold and roses only. Somehow or the other, they have become the preferred flowers for placing on graves. The former are available in garland form as well

the other with petals and impart brightness to the surroundings.

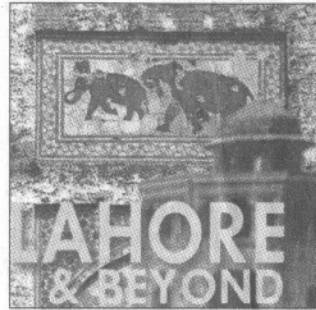
As the roses are of the traditional indigenous-*desi* variety and not the fancy but odourless hybrid experimentation with colour, form, width of petals, and decorative value, they carry and disburse a pleasant fragrance, too, at least for one or two days in a year. The citizen's visit to the dead makes the otherwise sad-to-grim graveyards come alive as a sweet-smelling, cheerful sight.

On Eid-ul-Fitr this year, as indeed every year, practically all the local graveyards were widely visited and the perfumed splendour composed of roses and marigold. Except a few unfortunate, unattended mounds housing people whose descendants have either migrated to another point within the country, settled abroad or the lineage has terminated for some reason, every grave seemed to smile.

Grief is one's basic association with graveyards; they evoke an image of starkly depressing, melancholic autumnal desolation. Flowers turned graveyards on Eid into a leaf from the spring season. Even otherwise, one was pleased to see that though the people do not seem to care much for the living, they at least have feelings for those no more among us.

There used to be only a sole florist or two at local graveyards till a few years back. The boundary walls of almost all graveyards of

Lahore are now dotted with them in a virtually canvas sheet to canvas sheet spread of kiosks. Flowers are, however, not the only commodity marketed at these outlets. Announcements in black words on white cloth hanging outside most kiosks inform of other items on sale



such as rose water bottles and 'finished coffins', besides other burial-related services.

The number of florists' kiosks has been on the rise in recent years, apparently to serve patrons and in proportion to the increase in the population of graveyards. How that has happened is anybody's guess because most graves are in the closest possible proximity to each other, their edges with-in handshake distance.

The florists are in profitable business the year round because people also visit graves of buried relatives, mostly parents, on their death anniversaries. On Eid-ul-Fitr, they generally head for graveyards straight after prayers, quite a few accompanied by children dressed in their festival best. The idea is to introduce the next generation to ancestors. The number of female visitors is also rising.

Needless to say, they, too, are dressed for the day.

Visiting graves of relatives has become an 'in' trend, a development that is to be welcomed in a society disturbingly committed to callousness. The rush is tremendous on Eid days. There are traffic jams and if a graveyard happens to be on the route of a motorist, his driving time from one place to another is certain to be longer.

To cope with the higher demand on such occasions, makeshift roadside flower stalls mushroom around graveyards, encircling them with a fragrant chain, offsetting the visitor's grief and lifting the pall of gloom that generally marks cemeteries, particularly local burial fields.

Grave-digging families assigned the upkeep of graveyards also carefully clean them, particularly parts that are regularly visited by relatives of the buried. The smell of dry, parched earth sprinkled with water mingles with fragrance of flowers and creates an atmosphere of peacefulness; the air is filled with tranquillity. Once in a while, the smell turns into poisonous odour for some living being. Tranquillity is shattered with indescribable pain. The florists, particularly those located at vantage points and doing brisk business need more space for fresh flowers and some of them extend their kiosks on either side of the boundary wall of a graveyard, encroaching upon the *kutchra* part of the road as well as inside the graveyard, appropriating a small stretch of perhaps six feet by four feet. That places graves next to the boundary walls and in imminent danger of being obliterated.

This cannot be accom-

plished by florists without connivance of the grave-diggers who are permanent living residents of the cities of the dead. Encroachments are very much on view. Qabza groups are ever on the prowl all over the city and their greed does not spare the dead.

They get away as those in charge must be partners in these cruel crimes. This happens because the operation is financially lucrative. What men would not do for money is simply unimaginable. There is no reaction to such encroachments when graves remain unvisited for a longish period but nothing can really be done once the space of a grave is 'sold' for business reasons.

I was witness to a tragic scene on Eid-ul-Fitr. A family came to Miani Sahib, the oldest and considering that so many famous and historical figures are buried there, the most prestigious necropolis of Lahore, to place wreaths on the grave of an ancestor, only to find that a florist had extended his kiosk over the last resting place of the deceased.

A man in his fifties, accompanied by some young members of his family, presumably his children, looked around in disbelief; he was dumbfounded for a while. Helplessness and frustration then gave way to rage, loud and heart-rending wailing but it was essentially impotent rage. "Where has the grave of my father gone? It was a cemented grave. Where has it vanished?" he lamented.

A crowd quickly formed around him. It sympathized with the man. Everyone knew the answer. But the despicable deed had been done and nothing could undo it.

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flowers on the two Eid festivals that they look more like the venue for celebrations than abode of the dead.

Lahore has nurseries at every turn and flowers are cultivated in many areas around the city as commer-

as flowers. Red roses — the chosen colour of the locals for graveyards — are sold more as petals than flowers.

People like to place rose petals on graves presumably because a grave can be easily covered from one end to