

The stories, one story, of those who have the luxury of spending their nights in the shadow of the Moghul monument of Chauburji

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By **Rehan Aslam Piracha**

**F**or many the Chauburji roundabout is nothing more than a Moghul monument but for Liaqat it's home where he comes to sleep the night with countless other homeless labourers in the city.

He is from a village in Vehari and arrived in Lahore just 22 days ago. It is not his first visit. He comes here after every wheat harvest when he has a year's supply of grains stored for his five daughters and wife by working as a hired hand during the harvesting season. He is disappointed this time. "The wages have come down to Rs 120 per day. Last time it was around Rs 150 per day. I used to visit my village every 15 days with Rs 2000 in my pocket," he tells *The News on Sunday*.

When asked how much he has saved until now, Liaqat replies, "Nothing." The work he has managed to find off and on has been just enough to pay for the meals. He spends Rs 50 daily, provided he uses the municipal taps in the Chauburji area for bathing, otherwise a shower may cost up to Rs 10-15 at a *hamam* (bath). Mostly he takes a dip where he goes for work, usually an under-construction house. He keeps his belonging, a couple of dresses, with the owner of the restaurant where he has his daily breakfast. He puts on fresh clothes after four or five days, and the washing costs him Rs 15 each time.

Liaqat is thinking about going back to Vehari where labourers usually get Rs 90 for a day's work. But he has no fare money. "Whenever I will

## homeless

get work for two days consecutively, I will take the bus home," he says.

Liaqat's only acquaintance in the city is Shahbaz, another labourer, who also sleeps at the Chauburji roundabout. They spread their sheets side by side and if one of them isn't around the other reserves space for his partner.

Shahbaz calls himself a nobody. He spent his childhood in forced labour camps. He was too young to remember his family or the place where he was kidnapped from. He left the camp and served as a farm hand for a man in Lahore for 17 years. Last month he was kicked out by his employer when he demanded his wages which had accumulated to a sum of Rs 250,000. "For

# Life in a roundabout way



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lage in Gujrat. His father owns a small piece of land but it isn't enough to support his five sons and their families. Shabbir started as a *tandoor* worker three years back. He spent a year in Karachi but the *tandoor* owner moved back to Lahore and brought him along. The owner since has again gone back to Karachi but Shabbir decided to stay in Lahore, being closer to Gujrat. His brother also works and earns about Rs 6,000. "We looked around for a room in the city and the cheapest one around had a monthly rent of Rs 2500," he tells *TNS*. They decided to stay at the roundabout to save money.

Shabbir is married and has a seven month old baby girl. He says it is getting all the more difficult to make ends meet. He could have found work in Gujrat but a person saves a lot when working away from home. "It's sort of *chaska* (addiction) you cannot give up," he adds.

But Liaqat says he is willing to work in his hometown but doesn't have the money and resources to buy land or take one on lease, a common practice in Vehari. "The poor are miserable wherever they are," he says wryly.

Liaqat has married off one of his daughters and the rest are aged between 8 to 14 years. He says all his daughters can read the Holy Quran, the only education he could afford and wanted to give his children. He believes girls from poorer economic backgrounds are more vulnerable and susceptible when they go out. "No one

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own. Everybody respects the boundaries of your home," Shabbaz says.

Like all people Shabbaz wishes to have a home, family and friends. "But in the straits that I am, dragging a girl to suffer the same will be cruel," he adds.

Both Shabbaz and Liaqat have strong faith in Hazrat Data Ganj Bukhsh and often go there to offer *fateha* at the shrine or when just passing by there. For many rustic labourers Data Darbar is the only source of succor in the city. When out of money most labourers eat from the *langar* there. But Shabbaz says he goes to the *langar* only if he is without money. "The *langar* is *tabarruk* to me and not food."

Shabbaz says many labourers have turned addicts due to the uncertainty at work. No one hires them and they eventually end up at the Data Darbar, begging for alms and food. He also points out many others also turn to crimes to make ends meet.

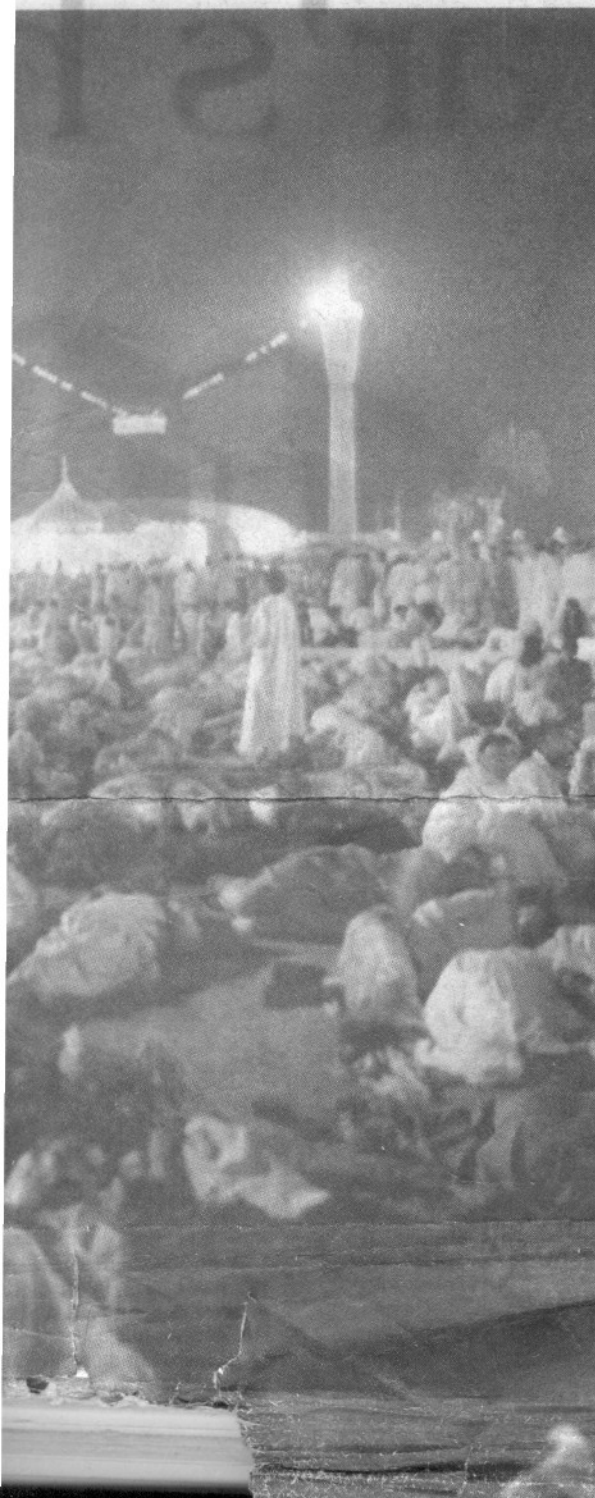
The growing population and lessening employment opportunities have compelled people living in remote towns and villages to move to big cities where they hope to find work and a chance to make a better living. For most this turns out to be a bitter experience but they decide to stay in whatever circumstances instead of returning home where there is no hope.

Aqeel, who often sits on the green belt at Chauburji along with friends, says the number of migrants to Lahore has fallen. "There was a time when we had to step on hordes of sleeping people to cross the roundabout." The boom in real estate and construction business till 1995-6 attracted a lot of workers from outside the city. There is no such demand for labourers nowadays.

The less numbers of sleepers at Chauburji could also be due to the expansion of Data Darbar whose corridors and floors are filled with people at night. One such corridor is occupied by women of all ages. Most of them are devotees who have come along with families, others destitute old women who have nowhere to go while some are runaways, says Ansar, a regular visitor to the shrine for the last 20 years.

Ansar tells *TNS* that the number of people sleeping at the shrine has increased. Most of them are labourers who work in the day and come to spend the night at the Darbar as it is safe where nobody would bother them.

Apart from the Data Darbar, homeless people also sleep at the back of the Badshahi Mosque and on the green belts and parks in the walled city. Even one can find sleepers on the green belt of Jail Road. In short wherever there is a green belt the sleepers are bound to



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point.

Asked if they were stopped  
from sleeping or harassed at  
the roundabout, they said  
nobody had stopped them but  
there was always a risk. "Even  
you can come upto us and ask  
us to leave. That is not the case  
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tion but certainly there are ways  
to make the transition less hor-  
rendous. Otherwise there is a  
great chance that Lahore will  
someday be compared with  
Mumbai and Calcutta, not in  
economic terms, but in the  
number of the shelterless and  
the homeless.*