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The hidden delights of Hira

By Majid Sheikh

THERE is something delightfully forbidden about the world's oldest profession. One is raised with the notion that it must be avoided, yet as one grows in age one is always tempted to discover and find the reasons why such a profession exists. No one has yet, since man walked this planet, found a plausible answer as to why this profession exists, and no one has been, or ever will be able to, completely eliminate it.

Lahore has a Hira Mandi, or Tibbi as it is called, where the oldest profession was 'legally' practised. The word 'Hira' does not mean that it was a diamond market, as it is sometimes wrongfully called, for it was named in the Moghal days after a Seth Hira Lal, a gentleman of Lahore who was fond of song, and dance, and the delights of food and wine. After all, at the end of a hard day's work it was the least any man of substance could do. Famous as Hira Mandi is, very few outside the Walled City know about it fully, for the wrongful perception about the place is that it is an evil corner of Lahore where flesh trade abounds. Nothing could be more erroneous.

It would certainly be a mistake to consider the place a prostitution street, even though some of its inhabitants certainly do indulge in this profession. The role of Hira Mandi has been constantly changing over time. It was originally, during the Moghal era, a heaven for the rich and famous who, like the Italian courtesans of Venice, entertained their clients with witty conversation, exquis-

ite food and wine, and were the very epitome of grace and manners. The courtesans trained here found their way into the Royal court, and they wielded considerable power at the very highest levels of government. The story of Anarkali and how she was gouted alive for trying to 'influence' a Moghal emperor-to-be is ample proof of how these ladies operated.

There was a time when the class and stature of a family was also, among other things, measured by the class of courtesans that the leading male members of the family frequented. This is something that just cannot be fathomed in this era of 'fundamentalism.' If we are told that the people of the Walled City are even today more liberal in their democratic discussions than the rest of the city and for that matter the country, there is a long history behind such a mental frame of mind. Experts call it the 'calm of civilization'.

With the coming of the Sikhs, power and money flowed towards the rural-based elite of the Punjab. They frequented the courtesans of Lahore and funded the various 'gharaanas', families, of classical music, among them the Patiala and Shamchorasi are seen today among the leading exponents of sub-continental classical music. The musicians and the music instrument makers dwelt in Hira Mandi, and with them came classical dance traditions, all of which took root in the city. The British saw the end of the influence of the old nobility, and much of the grandeur of Hira Mandi was lost in

this transformation. But the rural-based class of princely rulers continued to hold sway, and they financed the activities of the musicians, singers, dancers and others right till the time Pakistan came into being. Some of the greatest singers and musicians continued to belong to families that a raja or nawab had financed, and they all lived in this famous portion of Lahore.

With the coming of the 'talkies', many of these women found themselves new professions. Films provided them with the means to enlarge the scope of their work. It was, under Gen Ayub Khan that a fatal blow was dealt to this famous bazaar. The banning of prostitution meant that the vast majority of women actually involved in the flesh trade moved to other parts of Lahore, leaving the dancers and musicians behind. Most of them have continued to survive in an era of dwindling patronage, where even the Arts Councils have failed to provide them with the space to breathe and express themselves. In the end, it was their entrepreneurial flair that helped them survive. Today they are on the rise again.

It might interest the reader to know the physical contours of Hira Mandi. Situated on the north-western edge of Lahore, it embraces the eastern portion of the Lahore Fort. The central point is a mound known as Tibbi Chowk. From this point five roads flow. To the north it goes towards the Lahore Fort, to the west two roads fork out, both towards Taxali Gate, to the south it heads towards Tehsil

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Bazaar Chowk and onwards to become Bazaar Hakeeman, and to the east it heads towards Paniwala Talaab and on to Rang Mahal. The central point serves as the dividing line with regard to various professions.

Towards the two western portions are singing and dancing quarters. Ironically during the Zia era, both these were raided almost every day and charges of "indecent behaviour in public" brought against dancers and musicians living inside their own homes. In the lanes alongside these sectors are shops that specialize in making musical instruments, tailors that make clothes that end up creating the magic of the dancing girl, food shops that include the famous Phajja Siri Paeywallah and other delightful creations from the very best 'naan' to sweets of outstanding quality. These are surely the legacy of a regal age.

To the east live the former courtesans. Though in the smaller lanes it is dark and sinister, with pimps following you. In the British days a resident doctor had to certify as to the health of the inmates of the area. Today as prostitution is banned officially, no such thing can be put into operation. In this area the 'naths' are broken and girls introduced to life as courtesans. It is strange that those Moghal era practices still live on. Each lane, each street is strewn with history. The hundreds of rich and famous that walked these streets make stories that are worth telling. Murders over the beauty of a young courtesan has brought out many a beast. But those stories will have to wait.