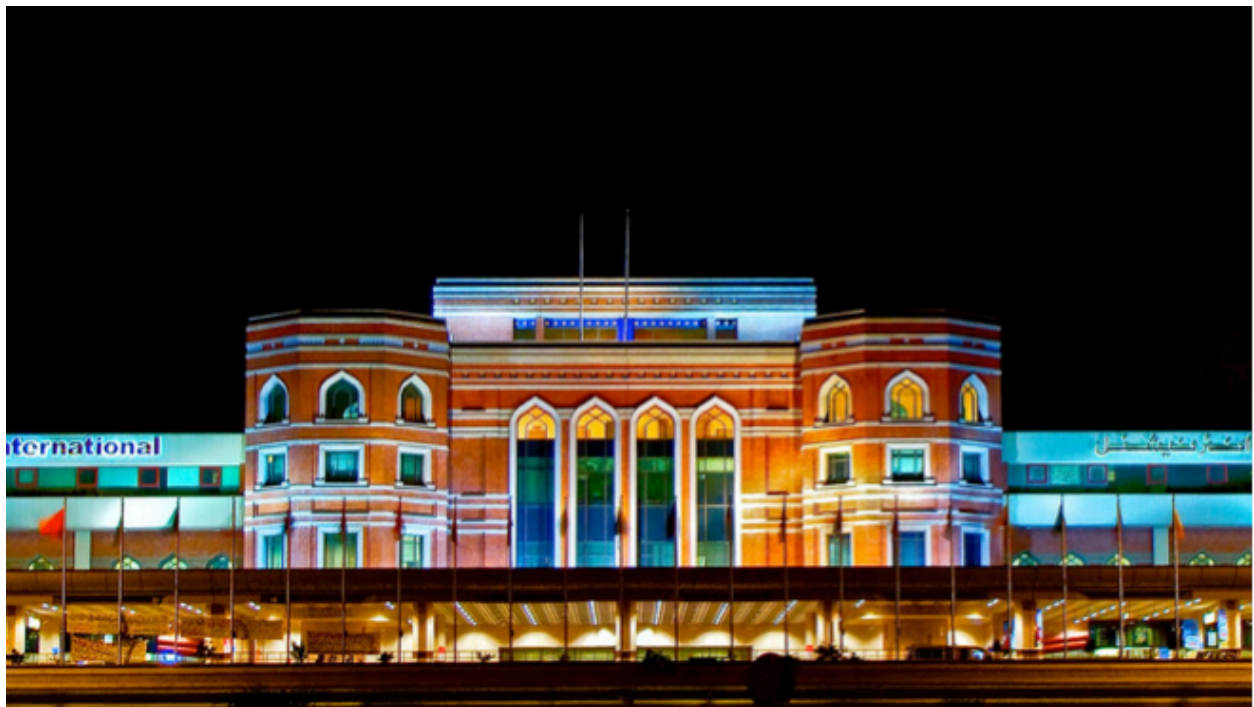


Andheroon Shehr

by Neiha Lasharie

The Heart of Pakistan. Along the perennially tense border between India and Pakistan lies a city so old its beginnings are lost to myth and legend; the historic capital of the land of Five Rivers, the province Punjab. Some legends, such as those in the *Ramayana* epic, suggest Lahore was known in olden days as Lavapuri, founded by Prince Lava, a son of the Hindu god and goddess Rama and Sita; other historical accounts of the city date back to the 1st Century AD, where it is referred to as Labokla. But whether two thousand years old, or 4000 years old, Lahore is a city unlike any other, a testament to the glory of truly organic, truly *city-cities*. So perhaps it is a little jarring that you arrive in Lahore the way anyone would to a big city in this day and age. Navigating your way through Allama Iqbal International Airport, you can see the city lights in the distance, but first you attempt to get out of the airport. Gently - and then slightly more forcefully - you shrug off the laymen-porters' offers to load up a taxi with your luggage. You look back at the airport, in its vaguely modern glory, and note the inherent Mughal influences - Lahore can't seem to divorce itself from that part of its history.



Allama Iqbal International Airport, named after the poet-philosopher Sir Muhammad Iqbal, one of the visionaries behind what is now Pakistan. I have visited his grave before, a red brick structure in the Old City of Lahore, within what is called the Lahore Fort. The entire area is a United Nations World Heritage Site and the heritage of Lahore runs thick in the narrow alleys, squat buildings, and the ground of baked earth - just as its heritage runs thick through me. It was in that moment that I realized just how privileged I was to grow up in a city with as much rich history as Lahore.



Old City; *Andheroon Shehr*; the Walled City of Lahore: this particular part of Lahore is known by many names, but the feeling it evokes from its Lahoris is the same: a nostalgia for a time long gone, but one known intimately to us. It hosts much of the heart *of* the Heart of Pakistan. Most importantly, it hosts one of many food streets across the city. For some, this particular food street - Gawalmandi Food Street - is the center of life in Lahore. Irresistible aromas beckon the wanderer; vendors stand above large cauldrons, stirring a thick, viscous liquid that will soon become the popular confection known as *jalebi*. In a corner, you see an extravagant booth. A young teenager, perhaps fifteen years old, sits cross-legged, a slightly morose expression on his face. His elaborate garb is likely meant to mimic Mughal costume (again, the city finds it hard to divorce itself from its history). The flower garlands around his neck are heavy - he finds it hard to be attentive while his patron orders *paan*, an admittedly addictive delicacy made out of betel leaves, cured tobacco, or areca nuts.

The majority of Lahore's population is Muslim, of either Sunni or Shiite persuasion, yet food is the true religion of the city. At any and all hours of the day the streets of the city will be vibrant with restaurants, street vendors, and off-the-wall corner shops only the true food-lover - the true Lahori - knows about: *khokay* as they are called in the strange amalgam of Urdu and Punjabi that is unique to Lahore. The food street is frequented by a cross-section of socio-economic backgrounds, and even those at the lower rungs of society can indulge themselves. The food is cheap, rustic, and quintessentially Lahori. It speaks of tradition that transcends class, a

love for food both emic and etic, lit by street lamps and lanterns; gas flames against midnight sky. Crudely put-together banners offset 18th century *havelis* (a mansion of historical resonance); these structures, with their low-lying balconies, are not uncommon in the Old City.



A woman leans on one of the balconies. It is difficult to find her in the picture, but this is of no consequence – in fact, you could likely miss her on the street too if it wasn't for the expression on her face; a look of strangely resigned tenacity. The building is brightly colored for all that the paint has faded over the years. Women's laundry is draped over the bannisters. In fact, a lot of women live here; they are likely all prostitutes, and this is *Heera Mandi* - Diamond Market - the red-light district of Lahore. There is a perverse poetry in its profane location right beside the most distinctive mosque in Lahore, the Badshahi Masjid, but Heera Mandi too has a historical presence in the Old City of Lahore. The women in this locale during Mughal times had a high status in society, often tasked with the job of imparting knowledge of South Asian heritage and culture to the children of the elite. Through dance, they ensured the longevity of South Asian literature, poetry, and music. The term "prostitute" was never associated with Heera Mandi in those days. Even if so, it certainly was not in a disparaging light. This, like many things in Lahore, changed upon the arrival of the British. Brothels were set up. The status of these women was reduced. Over time, they resorted to sex work – the British, in their wake, left a district of ill-repute, an illicit profession, and a disenfranchised industry greeted now with distaste, if not ignored entirely. It is the elephant in the room no one wants to talk about, and yet its existence stands as a testament to Lahore's past – to its historic role as the cultural capital of whatever dynasty the Indian Subcontinent was subordinate to. To capture Lahore was to win – or hold refuge – the heart of the region. And to colonize Lahore was to colonize the heart of India. But to split it was impossible, and despite the scars that mar the city and the violence that it witnessed

during the partition of India and Pakistan, it ended up wholly in the hands of Pakistan and, as such, became known as *dil-e-Pakistan* – the heart of Pakistan.



Lahore is rife with Mughal influences and those pre-dating the 15th Century, but it's important to remember the colonial British influences that have shaped the city as well, culturally and aesthetically. The Lahore Railway Station is an example of this, along with the General Post Office, as well as many other monuments. Culturally, the incrimination of prostitutes and Third Gender individuals (known as *hijra* or *khwaja sira*) was transculturated into society as a result of British colonization as well. Before the colonization, the *hijra* were employed often as guards to protect women in harems. Some were even granted esteemed administrative positions. And then, just as with the women of Heera Mandi, they were suddenly ostracized. Unwanted by women, unwanted by men. Yet another subculture created in the Old City.



However, it is the influence of South Asian culture that has perpetuated some of the most distinctive landmarks in Lahore. The aforementioned Badshahi Masjid – the King’s Mosque – is one of them. Red brick, distinctly Mughal: I have prayed in the expansive courtyards before, as a young girl, and I vividly remember feeling one with the people praying around me, feeling one with the city. I often mention how cities like Lahore – unbearably old cities that have seen a lot – fill you with nostalgia when you no more than walk through the streets; but in that moment of prayer, of prostration, I could feel the city itself inside me, and its history – for the briefest of moments – rushed through my veins instead of blood.

Lahore is a beautiful city, an old city. Most of it has modernized, with brands like McDonalds, Hardees, and others having opened franchises in the “new” city. Teenagers in t-shirts and jeans walking out of frozen yogurt joints are not an uncommon sight, nor are businessmen talking on their iPhones in BMWs, driving through traffic on the highways. But despite these modernizations, the juxtaposition between the old city and the new city – the KFCs against Gawalmandi; the underground nightclubs verses long-established, run-down brothels; the 21st Century glass offices as well as 17th Century mosques – does not take away from the beauty of Lahore as a whole. On the contrary, the inherent contradictions are what keep the Walled City so close to the heart of Lahoris everywhere. It is a phoenix that rises time and time again from the ashes, and as Farhan Ahmed Shah writes in *The Express Tribune*, “[...] at its heart, Lahore is a survivor. All of its bittersweet history is there to be seen in its tombs, mosques, palaces, fortresses, museums and gardens. It has seen ages of war and devastation, as well as periods of

cultural, intellectual, musical, literary and humanistic evolution. [...] For those who know how to listen, every place in Lahore — from the most monumental structure to the most ordinary street — has a story to tell.”

It is this inherent love of the city as a *whole*, the unmarred, unadulterated adoration of the citizens of their city, which preserves, more than any renovations or reconstructions, the Andheroon Shehr. *Lahore Lahore Hai*, as the oft-quoted saying goes:

Lahore is Lahore.



Works Cited

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