

LAHORE: THE CITY OF GARDENS

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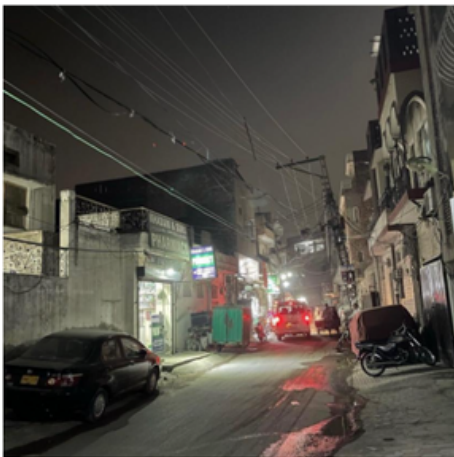
Lahore, Pakistan, my hometown, has never seen temperatures fall below -1°C in winter. Last December, I experienced extreme cold, snowfall and icy sidewalks for the first time here in Boston. Lack of daylight and lots of snow deprived me of color in my life. Going out was treacherous and I had locked myself up in my dorm room all winter to escape the freezing cold. From my window, all I'd see was stark white snow against the dark, gloomy sky. As someone who loves to spend time outdoors, all I wanted was to go out for a walk. I felt caged, lonely and depressed. It was during this time that I longed for Lahore –its warmth, color, energy, people and stories.

Home. This is the first word that comes to mind when I think of Lahore. In contrast to the giant structures of Badshahi Masjid, Minar-e-Pakistan, and Lahore Fort, that a quick Google search would show you, the Lahore that I grew up in, was quite small with a lot more energy, activity and chaos than the former could produce. I grew up in a small house located in Shah Kamal. The street was narrow, just wide enough to fit a small car. The locals knew better than to take their cars down the street. The amount of people that frequented it wouldn't allow it to pass smoothly at any time of the day. *Phal waalay* (fruit sellers), *sabzi waalay* (vegetable peddlers), *doodh waalay* (milkmen) and other vendors had set up small shops and stalls along the road. After school, children would play *gully* (street) cricket there, using chairs as wickets. The signature pale blue balconies of Shah Kamal's houses served as place for the residents to lean on, take a view of the street, and interact with neighbors and shopkeepers, adding to the street's bustle.

Jinne Lahore nai vekhya,
O jammeya nai. This saying
repeatedly crossed my
mind when I was cooped up
in my room because of how
strongly I agree with it. It
roughly translates into; you
haven't been anywhere if
you haven't been to Lahore.
It demonstrates how
significant and well-known
Lahore is — a person's life



is not complete without traveling to Lahore. Lahore is a lot more than its marketplaces (*Bazaars*), historical buildings, gardens and urban infrastructure. Its atmosphere, ambiance, feelings of happiness and melancholy, craziness and pleasure, fun and excitement, and, most of all, its inhabitants, make up its soul. Lahore was a key city throughout the Mughal era and this influence has permeated the city's history and culture. The city was founded long ago by wanderers, pilgrims, and travelers who came with the intention of establishing permanent homes. The brand-new beliefs, culture, and practices that these people had brought with them



had made Lahore the diamond of the Sub-Continent. Over the years, several civilizations have impacted the cultural heritage of Lahore. The city served as the regional capital of the Shahi dominion in the eleventh century, the Gaznavids in the twelfth century, the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, and other empires in

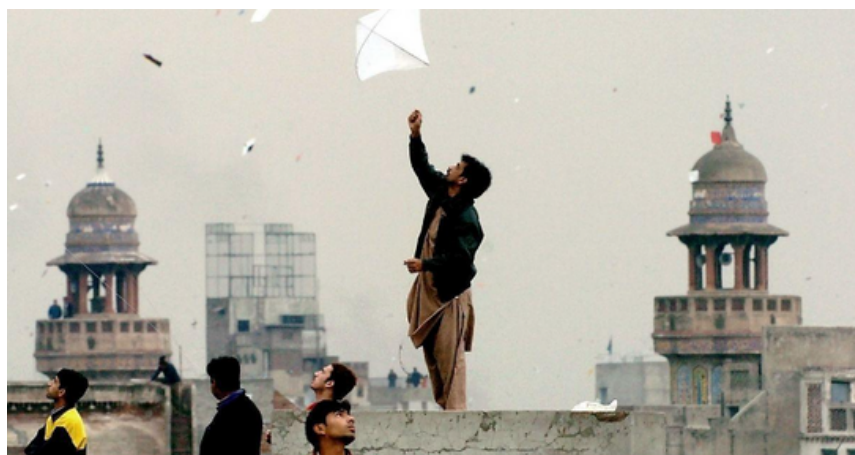
different eras. This also influenced the city's architecture. Most houses have intricate architecture featuring high roofs, screens for ventilation, overhangs as window shades and arches. The streets are narrow, especially when they curve, and are mostly well lit.

In Lahore, every street has a story to tell. Right outside my old home, in the midst of the *Shah Kamal* street, sits a busy breakfast shop, *Atari Mutton Channay*. Every morning, the owner, Atari hurriedly assists his customers as more line up outside the shop with their mouths watering in anticipation of Atari's flavorful mutton channay. The aroma of sizzling mutton and spices wafts from his small shop and envelopes the street, tempting passers-by. The shop is infamous for its flavor and attracts people from neighboring towns. Despite having to cater to several customers at once, Atari maintains a calm and friendly demeanor. He inquires about their well-being, families and work and enforces a sense of community. I find his story inspiring. After trying his luck at various professions, he became greatly disheartened but still had some fight left in him. As a final resort, he opened the shop.

At an age where most people start believing that they have only a few years ahead of them and give in to their circumstances, his shop is now flooded by customers as soon as the clock strikes seven in the morning.



Shops like *Atari Mutton Channay* have a long history. Since there were only a few jobs available for recently immigrated families from the subcontinent, people began opening up tiny stores in front of their homes. While some set up mere food stalls along the streets, the skilled artisans invested all that they had brought with them into small shops to make a living out of them. The clanking sounds that the big spoon makes against the steel pot while Atari puts food in his customers' plates alludes to the hardships these families have faced trying to fit into a culturally rich city like Lahore. These streets have seen a lot of struggle, restlessness and hard work that people like Atari have put into their work. A famous Punjabi poet, Mian Muhammad Baksh encapsulates the entire situation in a beautiful manner: *Maali da kam paanee laana, bhar bhar mashkan paway/ Malik da kaam phal phool lana laaway yaa naa laaway*. This roughly translates into; the gardener's responsibility is to water the plants using water-filled bags; it is up to God to permit the growth of fruits and flowers. I believe this resonates with the entirety of Lahore and its inhabitants. As human beings, the only thing that is in our control is the amount of effort we put into our endeavors. The outcome of those efforts is out of our control — just like a kite flying high up in the sky.



Kites were a representation of our existence in Lahore. In my younger years, I don't think there was anything that excited me more than flying a kite. The left half of the picture shows men gazing up at kites in the sky, totally focused, with their hearts set on the prize: nothing but a mere moment of victory. The person flying the kite here is standing on the edge of a rooftop. The building is 3 floors high, representing the lengths people of Lahore would go to in order to make their kite fly the highest in the sky. Unfortunately, blinded by joy and excitement, a few would even fall off these buildings and succumb to their injuries. Until 2007, Lahore, and the entire province of Punjab used to welcome springtime in mid-February – early March with a three-day festival, '*Basant Panchami*', the flying of colourful kites in the sky. The gatherings took place in late January or early February.

Basant as I know it, featured people dressed in new, crisp yellow clothes. The streets of Shah Kamal were well lit with string lights and decorated with yellow marigolds. I remember *mithai*, sweets, being exchanged among neighbours. Family members or friends with the biggest and highest rooftops would invite us over for a scrumptious meal featuring some of my favourite dishes and desserts such as *biryani*, *jalebis* and gulab jamuns and hours and hours of good music and kite flying. I felt strong and in control of my life as I saw my kite soaring towards the sky. It's possible that, in a manner, I came to identify with the kite itself as it soared freely and far above me, away from the bustling city, immersing me in a mood of adventure and freedom. To me, kites represent hope, a yearning for escape, and extravagant fantasies that are dependent on wind, a string, and the person holding the string.

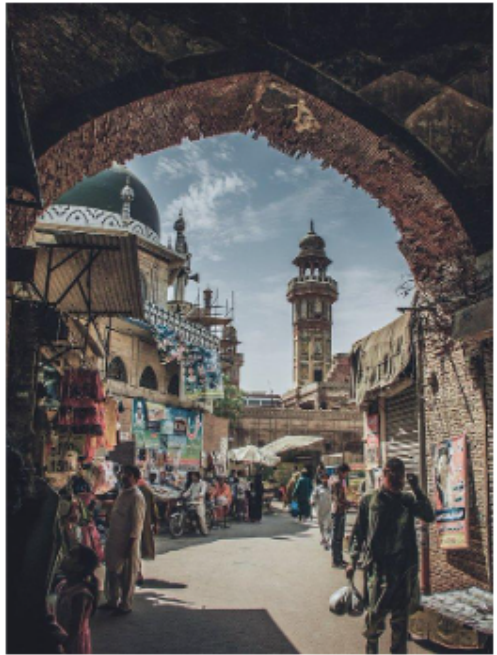
Historically, kite-flying took on a more competitive role after the partition of the Subcontinent into India and Pakistan. With loud yells of *Bokata*, the winner and his comrade would declare

the defeat of the opponent and issue a challenge for a follow-up pecha (Match). The beaten opponent would send up a brand-new kite in order to accept the challenge. The kite could not be captured until it was very high in the sky according to the game's regulations. To entangle or untangle one's kite from the opponent's grasp took significant maneuver — and this is what this city has seen throughout its existence. What remains now is only an ode to the bygone days, a skeleton of what Lahore's culture used to be.



The Walled City of Lahore is very distinct from the modern city that most are acquainted with. It has a culture and life of its own and is always bustling with activity. Only 13 gates or portals to the Walled City remain today. When I visited these gates, I wanted to recapture the spirit of a bygone Lahore and investigate the inner workings of the Walled City. I remember feeling nostalgic as I entered Bhaati Gate. At first glance, it looked like any other classic Mughal structure. I expected life inside it to be an ode to simpler times that I could immerse myself in, experiencing the rich history of the city.

Upon entering, I realized that the grand architecture housed worn-out insides. The residents were mainly of the working class. Their drab, disheveled dresses stood out against the rich history of the area. Most of them walked around in torn, ragged and dirty pieces of clothing that concealed their stocky physiques beneath. Others sported the traditional turbans, or had a dhoti wrapped around their waists, complementing



their thick moustaches. All in all, though there was no visible sign of affluence among them. This is true for all 13 gates. Although they are a testament to the undeniable proficiency in craftsmanship of the Mughals with their uniquely designed arches, they are home to poverty. Their dark by-lanes stretch on for miles, with a majority being cramped with an extension of shops. I came across a lot of young, malnourished, unclothed children forced into a life of hard labour. Instead of feeling the grandeur of the Mughal era, I was enveloped with guilt, regret and sadness.

The coexistence of the past and present and the vices and the virtues of the city is what makes Lahore special to me. It is a realm within itself. Walking around the streets makes me feel nostalgic because its graveyards, gardens and architecture all contain evidence of its melancholic past. It has lived through eras of conflict and destruction as well as intervals of intellectual, musical, and cultural advancement. It has been home to both festivals and famines. This duality and complexity make it a city

of hope for me. While pain persists within the 13 gates, there are people like Atari, who use that pain to fuel the fire within and make themselves the center of so much energy and activity. The time I spent indoors in Boston made me crave the complexity and chaos of home. Lahore for me is a place where every person, object, and piece of architecture has a rich history and story behind it, one that I am familiar with and have experienced to some extent. I longed to be in a place where each object made me relive my childhood and recall stories that filled me with warmth, brightened up my day and made it colorful — everything that Boston's cold had deprived me of.