Lahore, City of *Kuchas* and *Muhallas* of Artists

A Rarity in the World

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Abstract:

City of Lahore was a trade centre since ages. Traders from all over the world used to come and sell their products, which proved to be bloodline for the local art and crafts. Many forms of artistic expressions flourished here. Artists and artisans were encouraged and patronised by the rulers but these times of creativity ended when the Mughals lost control of the region and the city was plundered and looted both by the locals and foreigners. That’s why we see no substantial work produced during the 18th century, in and around Lahore that could be worth mentioning. First half of 19th century again saw a peaceful Lahore under the rule of a Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh who had a good eye for arts. This period proved to be revival of local arts in true sense. Artists and artisans enjoyed immense wealth and respect during the peak days of Lahore. Many areas, were named after them or their professions, a way to pay tribute to their contribution to the city.

The history of arts and crafts in the city of Lahore is not persistent. It kept on touching its peak in one era and loosing its importance at the other. It is important to investigate the history to establish the fact that the artists and artisans of the city have proven their abilities in whatever art form they touched during every period and under every dynasty.

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Lahore was Northern India’s gateway to Khyber and on the Silk Route for centuries. Travellers and merchants used to come from all over the world to the bazaars of Lahore to buy and sell their goods. With them came influences from different parts of the world. As a result Lahore tuned into a mosaic of skills. Here is how Bhola Nath (a 20th century historian) describes the streets of Lahore, “In the Mughal period, Lahore was a famous city. Its bazaars were crowded and people from far off lands used to come for business and pleasure. Iraqi horse riders and Afghani camel riders were a common sight. The mixture of Turkish, Persian, Hindi and other languages gave birth to Urdu language. ………. Crafts of every region could be found here. Silver and bronze work of Kashan, velvet from Isphan, carpets from Sheraz, shawls from Kabul and Kashmir, veils from Banaras, swords and shields of Damishq, gold and silver ware of Egypt, Kastoori (Musk) of Tibet and silk from China were all available in its markets.”

Another group of traders that Bhola Nath did not mention were the Europeans who were a common sight from Akbar’s period onwards. Basically they came to Lahore for missionary purpose but soon they saw the potential of Indian market and started importing and exporting goods at a limited level. They used to bring glassware, artificial paints, paintings, prints and other products and in return took spices and textiles etc. These paintings and prints were presented to the Mughal kings who handed them over to their court painters for studying and copying. This brought another element in the social and artistic life of Lahore.

Availability of so many products created a competition for local artists and craftsmen but they benefited from everyone and produced and created masterpieces that were uniquely Lahori in style.

In a report that was prepared in 17th century it was written, “Lahore was the ‘prime city of traffic in India’ in the third decade of the 17th century. All the commodities made there and in the neighbouring places were brought to Lahore and were purchased by the Uzbeg, Tartar, Kashmiri, Persian and Armenian merchants who exported them through Kabul to the countries of Middle East and Persia.”
Apart from being a trade centre this was a cultural centre also. Scholars, artists and craftsmen from every corner of the world have been coming to Lahore for centuries to find appreciation and patronage from its highly urban society. This was the city that gave everyone a chance to prove his ability and talent.

**The Kuchahs and Muhallahs**

The population of the city increased by the passage of time. In its peak days, it was the city of 36 Guzargahain, nine inside the Akbari wall and 27 in the east, north and south of Lahore. Later on Maharaja Ranjit Singh made many improvements. Discussing about the changes in Lahore during Sikh rule, it is written, “He (Maharaja Ranjit Singh) divided the city in small areas called Muhallahs and Kuchahs, and every locality had a local person as head. All the artists and craftsmen who had left Lahore due to its unrest were called back and settled in different Muhallahs.” Few names of the famous Muhallahs are written below with a description of the kind of work that was done there in those days.

1. Kuchah Naqarchian (Drummers)
2. Kuchah Dhobian (Washer men)
3. Kuchah Teer Garan (Arrow Makers)
4. Kuchah Kaman Garan (Bow Makers)
5. **Muhallah Naqqashan** (Illuminators/Painters)
6. Kuchah Darzian (Tailors)
7. Kuchah Mashkian (Water Bearers)
8. Kuchah Chabak Sawaran (Horse Breakers/Trainers)
9. Kuchah Loharan (Blacksmith)
10. Kuchah Naian (Barbers)
11. Kuchah Kandi Garan (Calenderers)
12. Kuchah Guhunghroo Sazan (The Makers of Small Bells that were tied at ankles during Dance)
13. Kuchah Daryai Bafan (A Kind of Silk Cloth Makers)
14. Kuchah Munj Kutan (The Beaters of Rice By-products)
15. Kuchah Wan Kutan (Rope, made of reeds or grass, Crushers)
16. Kuchah Chidi Maran (Bird Catchers)
17. Kuchah Kumharan (Potters)
18. Kuchah Kaghazian (Paper Makers)
19. **Kuchah Pat Rangan** (Silk Dyers)
20. **Kara Tar Kashan** (Drawers of Gold or Silver Wire, kind of needle workers)
21. **Kuchah Lakar Haran** (Wood cutters and sellers)
22. **Kuchah Tazabian** (Acid Makers)
23. **Kuchah Koft Garan** (Engravers)
24. **Kuchah Miti Putan** (Diggers)
25. **Bazaar Sheesha Moti** (Bazaar of Mirrors and Pearls)
26. **Kuchah Jogian** (Residence of Ascetics)
27. **Kinari Bazaar** (Bazaar of Gold Braids)
28. **Kuchah Khattatan** (Calligraphers)
29. **Kuchah Musawwiran** (Painters)
30. **Kuchah Sahafan** (Book Binders)
31. **Kuchah Charakh Garan** (Potter’s Wheel Makers)
32. **Kuchah Sada Karan** (The Ones Who Called On The Doors or Announced about the arrival of the king or courtiers)
33. **Muhallah Chahal Bibian** (Residence of Forty Ladies)
34. **Kuchah Kharadian** (Residence of Turners, Lathe Operators)
35. **Kucha Shami Hookan** (Evening Callers)
36. **Muhallah Deeba Baff** (Brocade Makers or Lace Makers)

This list shows many *Kuchahs* and *Muhallas* of Lahore that were named after the professions practiced by its inhabitants. People related to the art of calligraphy, illumination, painting and bookbinding occupied many of these localities. It is a very unusual feature because nowhere in the world we see a city that has so many streets and lanes called “*Muhallah of Painters*”, “*Muhallah of Calligraphers*” or “*Muhallah of Book Binders*” etc, Lahore was full of such examples.

Ahmad Bakhsh Yakdil has given the names of the artists who worked in 19th century and they were residing in one of above the mentioned *Muhallas*. “Mian Nur Muhammad Naqqash, Muhammad Amin, Muhammad Salah and Abdul Rashid Naqqash were the residents in *Kuchah Naqqashan*, inside Lahori Mandi.”

Artists belonging to all religious faiths used to live and work mostly in the following *Muhallas* of Lahore:
1. Kharadi Muhallah near Muhallah Rahmat Ullah
2. Chauhatta Mufti Baqir
3. Gumti Bazaar
4. Kuchah Naqqashan
5. Muhallah Chabuk Sawaran

If proof was needed, this indeed is important evidence, which shows that the artists were an important and respectable part of the society and there were even streets and lanes named after them. A map prepared in 1929 by the British Government shows areas that were named after local artists. As we can see one of them was after Basawan, who was a very famous painter of Akbar’s period. He used to live in the walled city and here a lane was named Street Sheikh Basawan (Sheikh was basically a title that was given to honour some individual). A nearby lane was called Rahim Bakhsh Street who was also a painter of Lahore.

The decline of Mughals proved to be a chaotic period for Lahore. Anarchy and destruction prevailed the city and people were killed, looted and the city was plundered innumerably. Late 18th century, early Sikh rule was very destructive also and it was only when Maharaja Ranjit Singh took over, the citizens enjoyed forty years of peace and prosperity after a long period of turmoil.

19th century saw a very peaceful Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was able to keep a balance among his subjects. Highly talented people of every religion were serving under him and wise counsellors like Faqir Aziz ul Din and Faqir Noor ul Din and able generals from Italy and France like Allard and Ventura surrounded him. Overall atmosphere was relaxed and free. There were many wealthy patrons who spent lavishly on arts.

This kind of society is ideal for the development of arts and crafts. Artists from far off areas started coming here and they worked with local artists who were innumerable. According to the archival material of Faqir Khana Museum there were more then two hundred workshops of painting and publishing where hundreds of artists were employed. Abdul Rahman Chughtai writes, “Till the arrival of British, Lahore was full of painters and many local painters and Naqqash were living all over the city.”
Books with beautiful calligraphy and illustrations were published here. Individuals had their portraits painted and paintings of religious and political personalities embellished the walls of the houses. *Nikahnamas* and other important documents were illuminated. Ivory painting and miniature painting were a common practice. Buildings were decorated with frescoes and *Kashi Kari*. Woven silks, printed cottons, weaponry, woodwork and Pietra dura were produced in the city. These were the common features of Lahori society.

From 1849, the British took over the area. Although their rule was not much destructive and they added many buildings and educational institutions to the city but they never patronized the local arts and introduced European thoughts and concepts. Local arts were discouraged and undermined. As a result to that we see loss of many beautiful artistic expressions, which were never to be recovered again.
Notes and References

6. I am thankful to my students at Naqsh School of Arts for providing me the names of many *Muhallahs* and *Kuchahs* in the walled city of Lahore.
7. www.sikh-heritage.co.uk Dated: 15th December 2007
9. Map available Punjab Archive
10. Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *Lahore Ka Dabistan i Musawwari* (Lahore: Chughtai Museum Trust 1979), 44.

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