

Old-city Lahore: Popular Culture, Arts and Crafts

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ABSTRACT:

Lahore has been known as a crucible of diversified cultures owing to its nature of being a trade center, as well as being situated on the path to the capital city Delhi. Both consumers and invaders, played their part in the acculturation of this city from ancient times to the modern era. This research paper investigates the existing as well as the vanishing popular culture of the Old-city Lahore. The cuisine, crafts, kites, music, painting and couture of Lahore advocate the assimilation of varied tastes, patterns and colours, with dissimilar origins, within the narrow streets of the Old-city. This document will cover the food, vendors, artisans, artists and the red-light area, not only according to their locations and existence, but in terms of cultural relations too. The paper also covers the distinct standing of Lahore in the South Asia and its popularity among, not only its inhabitants, but also those who ever visited Lahore.

Introduction

The Old City of Lahore is characterized by the diversity of cultures that is due to various invaders and ruling dynasties over the centuries. The narrow streets, dappled patches of light and unmatched cuisine add to the colours, fragrance and panorama of this unique place.



Figure 1. "Old-city Lahore Street" (2015)
By Amjad Parvez
Digital Photograph
Personal Collection

Inside the Old-city Lahore, one may come the steadiness and stationary quality of time, or even one could feel to have been travelled backward in the two or three centuries when things were hand-made, and the culture was non-metropolitan. The Old city Lahore is marked with almost thirteen gates known as *darwaza*. Every gate or *darwaza* has some significant value in terms of anthropology, traditions, cultural patterns and ways of living. These gates can tell the story of their glorious past as well as the decadence of the present time when this matchless heritage has been ignored by the high officials.

These gates include; *Raushanai* gate, *Kashmiri* gate, *Mastigate*, *Khizri* or *Sheranwala* gate, *Yakki* gate, *Delhi* gate, *Akbari* gate, *Mochi* gate, *ShahAlami* gate, *LohariorLahori* gate, *Bhatigate*, *Taxali* gate and an opening used for drainage known as *Mori* gate. There used to be a ferry station for transportation as *Delhi* gate and *Khizri* gate were connected through a ferry service.

"The river [Ravi] snaked its Way around the Walled City, touching Khizri Gate. Almost 250 years ago when the river decided to cut a new path, the ferry station redundant"

(Sheikh 22)

There are many important places around and nearby these gates, which have always been attracting visitors. These places are Lahore Fort, *Badshahi Masjid*, *Data Darbar Gawalmandi*, *Lunda Bazar*, *Duo Moria Pull* and *Anarkali*. Other such monumental places are the *Minar-e-Pakistan* and two well-renowned hospitals; the *Lady Willingdon Hospital* and the *Mayo Hospital*.

The constricted streets of the Old-city present a specific architecture with tall and sleek buildings, which only allows patches of sunlight to make their way through. In these contracted passages, one may find, early morning or late at night, numerous local dishes to enjoy their breakfast or dinner. Here the city rises at dawn and like to have breakfast on the benches or on the plinths, alongside the streets.

Fried, baked and Bar B.Q cuisines are the hot favourites in these areas. On the other hand, these streets hold gigantic markets of cloth, Jewelry, cosmetics and household items namely *Azam Cloth Market*, *Suha Bazar*, *Kinari Bazar*, *Rang Mahal Bazar* and *Shah Alami Bara Market*.

Another important market of cotton yarn is well-known as *Sutar Mandi*. All these markets still exist at the same locations, where they were, one or two centuries ago. These markets can offer the customers, every possible object to buy; ranging from a mere needle to stitch, to an imported machinery; depending upon the buyer's capacity and interest.

Other known markets and streets are; *Kashmiri Bazar*, *Gumti Bazar*, *Taxali Bazar*, *Paniwala Talab*, *Chowk Nawab Sahib*, *Said Mitha Bazar*, *Totta Bazar*, *Papad Mandi*, *Kasehra Bazar*, *Bazar Waan Watta*, and while entering in *Sutar Mandi*, we come across with the two lanes named *Neeli Gali* and *Rangwali Gali*. These markets have invited many travelers, and these attractions also tempted many invaders as well.

Neeli Gali was known for the *Neel* or Indigo that was famous, not only all over the subcontinent but also in other parts of the world, and Lahore has been an exporter city for this product since ancient times.

The Greek sage *Periplus*, writing in 80-90 AD, mentions indigo and its connection with the River Ravi. He writes,

"This River (Sinthus, i.e. Indus) has seven mouths and it has none of them navigable except the middle one only, on which there is a coast mart called *Barbaricon* (Lehar, or Lahore) articles imported into this mart are. On the other hand, there are exported *Costus*, *Bdellium* and *Indian Black* (indigo)."

(Sheikh 34)

Bapsi Sidhwa¹ named Lahore as “A City of Sin and Splendour”, as she compiled a book with diverse writings on Lahore. This city has the spiritual as well as the sinuous patterns at the same time. Lahore is the city of shrines and Sufis, and it is, nevertheless, the city of glamour and prohibited activities.

Since Lahore has been known as a market place traditionally, therefore, it has the associated attractions for customers since long. It has always quenched the thirst and satisfied the hunger of its visitors with lavish cuisine and unmatched beauty. The food and the red-light area are the two features that the entrance of Old-city Lahore; *Taxali Gate* has been famous for, with variety and diversity in food and women.

“Named after a nobleman fond of wine, women and song, Hira Mandi, or Tibbi in common parlance, situated in the walled city of Lahore, was in its heyday the pleasure-seeker's paradise.”

(Nevile 53)

Behind the *Jharokas* and small brick architecture, and under the shadow of the great *Badshahi Masjid*, exists the red-light area since centuries. *The Tibbi Gali* and the *Chakla Chowk* are well known, rather notorious such places.

“When you enter Lahore's walled city through Lohari Gate, probably the oldest ‘darwaza’ after the now demolished Taxali Gate, the road runs for about 400 yards and enters an opening known once as Chowk Chakla, the original red-light district of the city.”

(Sheikh 33)

The night life in Old-city Lahore has remained alive with music and dance activities at the traditional *Kothas*² inside the *Taxali Gate* whereas, the same vicinity has been a busy market for handmade shoes and embroidered clothes during the daytime.

¹ A famous novelist of English language born in Lahore

² *Kotha* is a two or three storied building, especially in the red-light area which has traditionally served as a performance stage for singing and dancing

Akbari Mandi is the largest market of the city, mainly for dry fruits, spices and herbs while *Kinari* Bazar is a good place to shop bridal clothes. *Kasehra* Bazar holds a decent collection of modern and traditional utensils, and *Suha* Bazar offers gold jewelry.

Around the gates and along the walls, one may come across the vendors and small shops selling used imported clothes; called *Lunda* in the local jargon. Middle and lower middle-class populace of Lahore prefer to shop within the Old-city markets due to compatible prices and good quality.

In Old-city Lahore, people live in multi-storey houses, erected upwards to deal with challenges of lesser living space. The traditional architectural patterns ornate the elongated facade of these buildings, with pigeon cages and water-pots for birds on the rooftops. The same rooftops are used to fly kites in everyday life and specifically during celebrations of *Basant*.

The streets of the Old-city Lahore are always alive with vendors selling goods and providing services from a soothing massage to a haircut and shave at your doorsteps.

Cuisine

The general populace of Lahore is food loving. They love every type of food, whether it is modern or traditional. Generally, throughout the city and significantly in the Old-city, there are shops, carts and even mid-shift arrangements for a variety of food items. To count these items is almost impossible. However, there are few, which can water any mouth.

“Gawalmandi in Lahore is famous for its Food Street, while Luxurni Chowk, and Shahi Mohallah are also located in older parts of Lahore.”

(Malik 111)



Figure 2. "Traditional Food on a Festival" (2015)

By Amjad Parvez

Digital Photograph

Personal Collection

Nan Chaney, Nan Haleem, Siri-Paye, Pathoorey, Halwa Puri, Hareesa, PeethiWaley Laddu, are some popular menus available in almost all the streets. Bar B.Q, Mutton, Beef and Chicken *Karahi* and *Biryani* or *Pulawo* are other approved dishes for lunch and dinner. Breakfast has a truly specific place in the Lahore culture; all these narrow streets provide extravagant breakfast, which started to be served very early in the morning accompanying *Lassi*³ or tea in all seasons.

The *Tandoor* is a multipurpose oven often found at every corner of the street serving freshly baked *Roti, Nan, Baqarkhani* and *Nankhatai*. It is a common practice that inhabitants of the Old-city Lahore do not like to cook, and eat, breakfast at home. Rather they like to go out and have their breakfast at a Tea Stall or at a *Khokha*⁴ or Wooden Bench with a variety of eatables available with excellent taste and guaranteed freshness. This aspect also cast light on the socialization as a pivotal feature of these people who start their day by mixing up with their neighbours and friend

³A popular drink made by churning fresh yogurt and milk together

⁴ A temporary small shop normally under shade of a tree or a large building

early in the morning. At these Tea Stalls or shops, they discuss politics, foreign affairs, current affairs, music and arts and every type of concerns of mutual interests.

Many of these food shops are deprived of any door or shutter as they never got closed and, in routine, serve their customers for twenty-four hours. At night, if one goes through the alleys of Old-city Lahore, dinner or supper is always like having a treat; alone or with friends.

“Those who know Lahore intimately can feel its romance as they gaze across the rooftops of the walled city and glimpse the spires of its colonial-era buildings”

(Shah 227)

Crafts

The Old-city Lahore is blessed with very talented and, in some cases, matchless artisans. These craftsmen are known throughout Pakistan for their precision and delicacy in carrying out even the most difficult hand-made items. As an old tradition, the whereabouts of the *Taxali* Gate and *Mochi* Gate, are famous for luxurious hand-made shoes. These shoes include not only the conventional or cultural footwear but also fulfil the demands of international shoe brands. The *Khussa*⁵, *Khairi*⁶ and *Chappal*, made with pure cow or sheep leather and ornamented with *Tilla* (gold thread), or other materials, are considered more as handicrafts rather than mere footwear.

In the same locality, one can find craftsmen busy in making Guitar, Harmonium, Drum, *Dholak*, *Tabla*, Flute and other musical instruments. These areas of the Old-city Lahore are famous in Pakistan, where musical instruments; traditional as well as modern, are made by hand. These instruments need extra care and sensitivity in their making as they deal with sound quality with subtle variations. These hand-made musical instruments are part of the rich cultural heritage that this part of the city is known for.

⁵A local Pompeii style shoe made from pure leather

⁶A local sandal made from pure leather

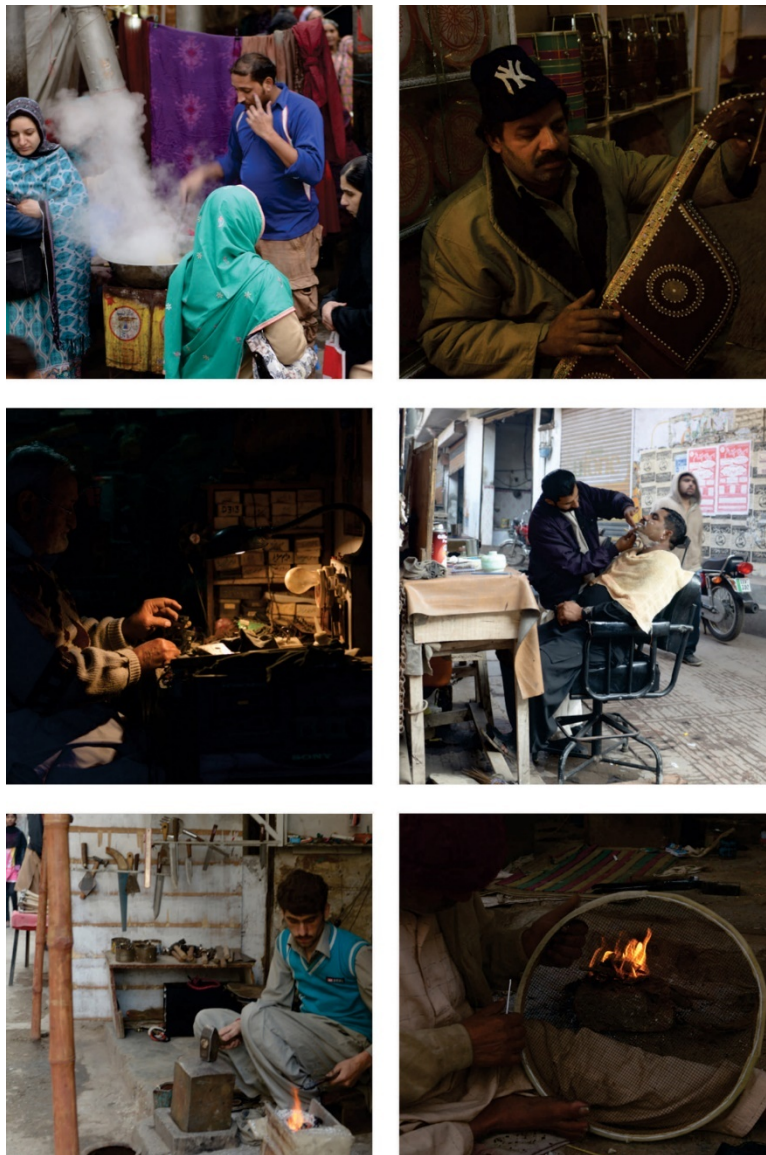


Figure 3. "Old-city Professions" (2015)
By Amjad Parvez
Digital Photograph
Personal Collection

Towards the Rang Mahal area, near the *Shah Alami* Gate, there are jewelers of very high standards. These jewelers are now adopting machine made methods to accomplish needs of international design but, at the same time, there are craftsmen who still have the belief in their skill and craft. The handmade jewelry in gold and silver, with traditional designs and original stones appear as a royal element. These jewelers and

jewelry makers are found sitting in small shops at Rang Mahal around the Famous Suha Bazar, busy in their work. The same jewelry makers also practice their skills at the narrow streets of old Anarkali, near the metropolitan life on the Mall Road.

Towards Urdu Bazar, around the famous Paisa Akhbar street, the molding and casting technique is practiced for making small metallic items. In these streets, there is another profession which the artisans seem busy all the time; the Bookbinding. The art of Book-making and Bookbinding has remained an old tradition related to the scholarship of the Muslims of the golden age of 12th century Baghdad. Lahore has all the ingredients for traditional Bookbinding where the artisans stitch the papers with string and needle and use very simple machines only to press the newly bound book or to imprint the typeset on the title.

Kites

The art of kite-flying and kitemaking has been a centuries-old tradition associated to the Old-city Lahore. The best kite-flyers and kite-makers have been living within the Walled-city and contributing to the million-dollar kitemaking industry.

The narrow rooftops of the tall houses of the Old-city Lahore have witnessed countless kites, and the matchless skills of the kite flyers. After partition, Lahore started celebrating *Basantas* a Lahori festival which attracted many from the nearby and far away cities to come to Lahore. Especially during the last fifteen to twenty years, the *Basant* and the kite-flying received attention from all and sundry, and *Basant* has been celebrated on a large-scale and almost at the official level. This event in the late days of February or early March, became a tourist attraction and boosted the hospitality business as well.

However, traditionally, the kitemaking in the Old-city Lahore is part of street culture. The kite-makers, who usually adopt this profession, as a family business construct high-quality kites of various designs and sizes, which can cost from rupees five to five thousand, or even more. Other accessories of kite-flying like thread, gum and tapes are also manufactured in these small alleys.

There are two different levels involved in kitemaking, the first is the professional kitemaking where the kites of high quality are produced in bulk as a business. The second level is where the children of the Old-city made their kite themselves by the help of an appropriate piece of kite-paper, or any light-weight paper and few bamboo sticks. Culturally, every child, especially a boy, at the Old-city Lahore, knew how to make a

kite where kite-flying is just a second nature for him. The kites made in Lahore are sold to other cities of Pakistan, generating a healthy business for the craftsmen and the city.

However, since the sanctions have been imposed on kite-flying and *Basant*, due to accidents caused by the metallic string for kite-flying, this business has faced a rapid downfall.

Music

The fertile lands of Punjab and the five rivers are good enough reason for its inhabitants to have a natural inclination towards music. Lahore has remained the center of Punjab, and it has been a city of opportunity for everyone. This feature, attracted many musicians, vocalists as well as instrument players, to find their luck in this city. Historically, because of the royal nature of Lahore, being the capital city (1584-1594) of Akbar's period, and later as the capital of the Sikh Empire (1799-1849), Lahore provided opportunities and patronage to every kind of artists.

Music, being a favoured form of art, acclaimed popularity and acceptance in Lahore and many of the best performers of music settled in Lahore. During the modern era of twentieth century, after the establishment of Radio Pakistan and Film Industry, Lahore remained, not only a cultural center, but also a market for all sort of music.

After the partition in 1947, many known musicians and singers migrated from India and settled in Lahore. The Mohini Road of Lahore, opposite to the historical *Taxali* Gate, is known for the individual singers as well as for the Gharana⁷ Singers with Patiala Gharana as the prominent of all. Individually, in modern era, the legendary Ghazal singer Mehdi Hassan was also born inside *Taxali* Gate. Classical singers of the Patiala Gharana Ustad Amanat Ali Khan, Ustad Fateh Ali Khan, Ustad Hamid Ali Khan also belonged to the localities of *Taxali* Gate.

Even, the maestro of playback singing in India, Muhammad Rafi was born near Bhati Gate where his brothers still live.

Ustad Ghulam Hussain Shagga, Pervez Mehdi, Ghulam Abbas, Fida Hussain, Hussain Bakhsh Gullu and Rajab Ali are few famous names. On the other hand, the streets of Old-city Lahore groomed many female singers; Punjabi folk singers Surinder Kaur and Parkash Kaur were

⁷ Family, or House, of singers that has the status of an institution for this artform

born and educated in Lahore. Whereas, Farida Khanum, Iqbal Bano, Suraya Khanum, Zubeda Khanum, and Naheed Akhtar also proved their worth by living in Lahore.

The Old-city Lahore produced many matchless music directors as well. Few bigwigs are: Baba G. A Chishti, Rasheed Atray, Wajahat Atray, Khwaja Khurshid Anwar, Master Inayat Hussain, Master Manzoor Hussain, M. Ashraf, Khalil Ahmad, Amjad Bobby, and Sahar Ali Baggah.

Painting

Along with the musicians, the Old-city Lahore produced many famous painters as well. Khalifa Imam Din lived in Kucha MittiPuttan, Baba Miran Bakhsh Moortanwaley, who also served the Mayo School of Arts (now NCA), was born in Kucha Musawaran near *Gumti* Bazar in the walled-city Lahore. Later names include Ustad Allah Bakhsh, who was born in Wazirabad but spent his childhood and professional life in Lahore, whereas AbdurRehman Chughtai was from Kucha ChabukSawaran of the Old-city. Many modern painters who earned their names at national and international levels include Iqbal Hussain; born and brought up inside *Taxali* Gate at Hira Mandi.

Landscape painter Ghulam Mustafa, prominent printmaker Mehboob Ali, and miniaturist Khalid Saeed Butt, all were born in the vicinities of *Bhati* Gate. The streets and culture of Old-city Lahore have remained a major subject of the landscape and cityscape artists. Not only Pakistani artists, but also the nineteenth-century Colonial Period artists, captured the romance of the Old-city Lahore. William Simpson (1823-1899), William Carpenter (1818-1899) and Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903), focused significantly on the beauty and harmony of the Wazir Khan Mosque inside Delhi Gate.

Ghulam Mustafa and Ajaz Anwar are known particularly to encompass the street culture of Old-city Lahore, and these two big names have captured almost all the important sights of the city. Ajaz Anwar, Ghulam Mustafa, Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi and Munawar Mohiuddin are among those artists who have rendered paintings of all the thirteen Gates of the Old-city Lahore.

Couture

The streets of the Old-city Lahore are also famous for the best-quality cloth. The renowned Azam Cloth Market is the largest not only in town but also in Asia for a variety of cloth and couture.

The labyrinthic alleys of the *Rang Mahal* and Azam Market, shelve the high-quality local and imported cloth which retailers from all over Punjab, came for purchasing. The Old-city Lahore is known for plain as well as embroidered cloth with exclusive traditional work of *tilla*⁸, *dabka*⁹, *Aar*¹⁰ and thread. The streets of Lahore are populated with very expert and hardworking artisans who work day and night for a nominal amount of money. However, this unique and royal cloth, after being embroidered by hand, sells at a very high price in elite areas of Pakistan and abroad.

Conclusion

Lahore is a unique city. The Old-city Lahore is a colourful chapter from history which, even today is as alive as it was in the royal days of Akbar and Ranjit Singh. The street culture of Lahore is very rich in all aspects. The food, fun and professional expertise of the Old-city Lahore has unique taste and parameters, which have evolved over the centuries.

From the simplest professions to the technicalities of the jewelry and kitemaking, and intricate architecture, Lahore has been a prominent city of South Asia. The cuisine, crafts, music, architecture, art and couture are the fields best known for the historical as well as modern-day benchmarks.

⁸ Gold thread for embroidery

⁹ Spring type of coiled thin thread or wire which is sewed in to create intricate patterns.

¹⁰ Aar is a kind of needle, and the work done with hand

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