

Basant and Pehalwani: Dying Cultural Traditions of Punjab (A Case Study of Lahore)

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Introduction

Each nation of the world has its own set of customs and traditions that are the results of its specific milieu, beliefs and religious inclinations. These in turn mould and effect, in a particular way, the living style, cultural pattern and psychological demeanours of a society. Moreover, without ceremonies and traditional practices to unite us together as a single community, we tend to drift away from each other and face the world alone. The modern life-style crushes traditions, while traditions are the backbone of a culture. A culture that loses its traditions disappears. Punjabi culture is famous throughout the world; however, it is fading away as its upholders are changing their traditions.

The term 'topophilia', which plainly means 'love for place', is tremendously rich in semantic meaning and is widely used in contemporary philosophy, psychology, sociology and cultural studies. The term topophilia was familiarized by Yi-Fu Tuan, an American scholar of Chinese origin, who proposed a new approach in studying the relationship between man and the environment in his book. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, topophilia may be defined widely to include all emotional connections between physical environment and human beings, the philosophical and psychological notion of identity and the mental and emotional sense of belonging of an individual to a certain place, location and space (Suvorova 2011). Moreover, a relation between a human and a place persists only because of prevailing traditions; if these traditions become extinct, love for place and emotional attachment cannot transmit.

In the same way, there are many traditions in the Punjab which are fading away due to numerous causes: religious, political and economic. Therefore, 'love for place' in the Punjab is disappearing due to its dying cultural traditions. This research deals with two most important traditions of Punjab especially Lahore: *Basant* and *Pehalwani*. *Basant* is

an old age tradition of the Punjab. Originally, a festival celebrated in the region to herald spring and expressing joy over the plentiful wheat crops, in its core, it is a kite flying festivity when the yellow colors of the mustard fields dominate the whole life of the Punjab. It has disappeared from the Punjab and emotional attachment with Lahore has been wiped out. Moreover, for centuries, Punjabi people have fanatical interest in sports and the most important traditional sport of the Punjab is *Pehalwani* (wrestling). It is considered that the health of the *pehalwans* (wrestlers) reflected on the health of society as a whole. Today, however, the popularity of this tradition is in sharp decline and the topophilia of Lahore is disappearing because of extinction of these cultural traditions. A large number of people were emotionally attached to Lahore due to its vibrant and traditional culture. Therefore, it is imperative to have a debate on *Pehalwani* and *Basant* as dying cultural traditions in detail, to determine the value of these traditions in relation to love with space.

Pehalwani

Pehlwani is the most renowned and traditional form of wrestling in the subcontinent. *Akhara* (earthen pit) is a place for exercise, practise, training and lodging for *pehalwans*. Indians paid much focus on the bodily strength in the early 20th century. A strong and powerful body became the ideal of young Indians due to their relation with this beautiful tradition of *Pehalwani*. *Pehalwans* did hard exercises and took great care of their physical health. In the early 20th century, many renowned *pehalwans* were born in the subcontinent. All of them have proved themselves as the best *pehalwans* such as Gama Pehalwan, Imam Bakhsh Pehalwan, Kikar Singh, Ramzi Pehalwan, Boota Pehalwan, Gongga Pehalwan, Khalipha Pehalwan, Rahim Bukhash Sultani, Kaliya Pehalwan and Bholo Pehalwan (Alter 2010).

The main reason for the ardent interest of people was the charisma or personality of wrestlers that was the amalgamation of power, expertise and hold on art and control on their passions. Many people inclined towards them and had started *Pehalwani* as a profession because of the character of renowned *Pehalwans* of the land. Another reason of appeal was the kings and princes of different states who sponsored *Pehalwans*. They had awarded them land, money and a mace (*gurz*), made of gold and silver connected with precious jewels like rubies. The rulers

of states patroned *Pehalwani* not only for their entertainment but they backed this precious cultural tradition for the reason that it highlighted their authority and as it nurtured a symbol of concord among the populace. *Pehalwans* did their exercise and training under the direction of celebrated *Pehalwans* hired by the rulers in Kohlapur State, Patiala State, Junagadh State, Baroda Vadodara State, Hyderabad State and many more among approximately 560 states of the subcontinent. However, the finest *pehalwans* belonged to the Punjab, while topmost areas for *Pehalwani*, within Punjab, were Lahore, Gujranwala and Amritsar (Alter 2010).

Muslim *pehalwans* made a great contribution in uplifting this art in the world of *Fun-i-Pehalwani* (art of wrestling) both at home and abroad. In the 18th and 19th century, most of the wrestlers belonged to the state which sponsored them. After the partition, rulers of the states were given the option to choose either India or Pakistan. In the process of allegiance, most of the states lost their independent status and economic deprivation was the order of the day, so they stopped sponsoring the *pehalwans*. Earlier, the undefeated champion was awarded with the title "Rustum-i-Hind" and after independence "Rustum-i-Pakistan" (Chaudhary 2010).

Lahore - A Centre of *Pehalwani* in Punjab

Lahore, being a historic city, has produced many eminent *pehalwans* and has many *akharas* until date. Three famous *Daff* (assemblies) of *pehalwans* are still working in Lahore and their members are entitled as *Daff-dar* (L. D. Pehalwan 2015). After the Partition of the Punjab in 1947, the sport of *Pehalwani* remained popular in Lahore. The appetite for *Pehalwani* was evident from the over-crowded stadiums in almost every city of the Punjab, particularly Lahore. In essence, topophilia of Lahore was connected with *Pehalwani*, which created a sense of 'Lahore Lahore Ay' (Lahore is Lahore).

Bholu Brothers of Lahore were very popular in the Punjab and all over the world in general and were renowned *pehalwans* because of their outstanding skills. People were grateful to them because they were their Sports Heros. The Bholu Brothers belonged to a *pehalwan* family of Kashmiri origin which had distinguished titleholders like Bholu Pehalwan, Goga Pehalwan, Akki Pehalwan and Aslam Pehalwan. All

titleholders in *Pehalwani* were the sons of Imam Bukhsh Pehalwan (*Rustam-e-Hind*) and nephews of the Great Gama. The *Akhara* of Bholu was titled *Dar-ul-Sayhat* and was situated in Karachi. Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan gave the place to Bholu Pehalwan to use for *Pehalwani*. The Government of Pakistan, until Ayub Khan, frequently sponsored the family of Bholu Pehalwan in acknowledgement of his struggle and commitment to this cultural tradition (Aslam 2015).

From 1947 to 1970, almost the first two decades of Pakistani nationhood, the love for *Pehalwani* was on its peak and Lahore was the major centre of renowned *pehalwans*. *Pehalwans* presented and demonstrated their abilities at the traditional festivals or exhibitions called *Melas* in Punjab. The *pehalwans* regularly performed their skills at public congregations and concerts. Those were the precious days when Lahore was ruled by the *pehalwani* lifestyle. People used to assemble just to watch the legendary *pehalwans* training. Saturday was the key day for the Lahoris because there was always a fixed show of *Pehalwani* (A. C. Butt 2015). People had a grand demonstration in which drums could be heard in the streets of *Pehalwani* concerned cities of Punjab, especially Lahore. The contending *pehalwans* dressed in loose-fitted clothes. A *pehalwan* was greatly ornamented, wearing a colossal turban on his head and carrying a shimmering mace in his hands would lead the *Dangal* (procession) while seated on the front chair of a horse driven farm cart. A skilled high-ranking *pehalwan* would ring a large bell and announce the names of wrestlers. The main fighting gatherings commenced on Sundays in Lahore (Lahori 1994). The details of a *pehalwan's* name along with their *Khalifa* (teachers) and the *daff* (group) to which each *pehalwan* belonged was also announced whenever there was a domestic or local *Dangal*. All the announcements were followed by loud drum beating.

Still there are many places in Lahore in which posters of renowned Pehalwans are hung in memory of this healthy dying cultural tradition of Punjab (Figure 1). This was the period when most of the indigenous business executives and traders were connected with one or another *daff* in Lahore, even throughout Punjab. At that time, the main location for *Dangals* was Minto Park, Lahore and famous fights, after partition, were hosted by *Akhara* Minto Park (Lahori 1994).

As a result, Pakistan collected 18 wrestling gold medals, 5 in Asian Games and 1 Gold in the 1960 Olympic Games. In 1986, Pakistan won 10 gold medals in the Commonwealth Games. Despite that, *akharas* that were once crowded with thousands of spectators are now muted.

Since the ancient period, *Pehalwani* encouraged a large number of following in Punjabi culture as a national sport. At present, the admiration of this cultural tradition is in sharp decline owing to varying tastes, modern way of life and values adopted from the West. Traditional *akharas* of *Pehalwani* are dying with their perfect ethos of discipline, interactions and patience.

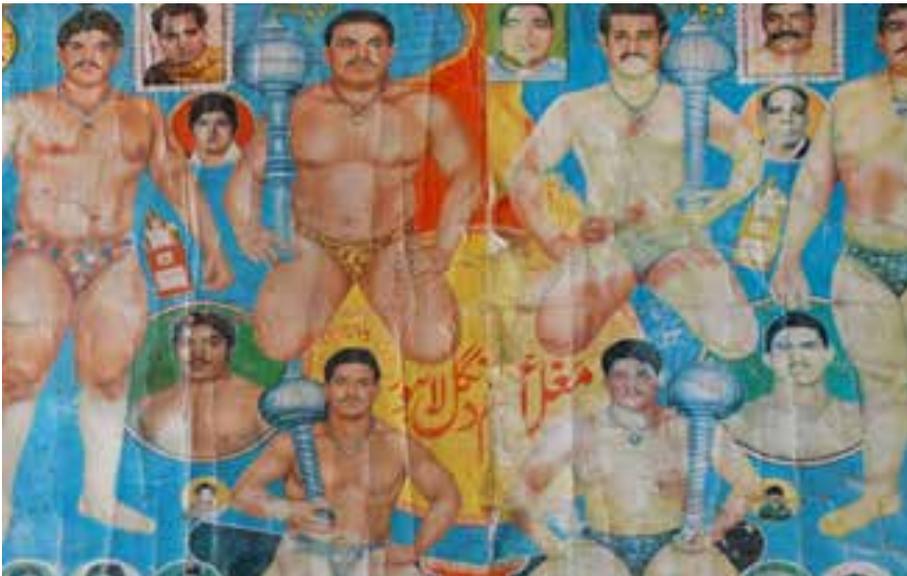


Figure 1

Poster in a tea stall.
Photograph by
Author

Demise of *Pehalwani*

The decline of *Pehalwani*, being a cultural sport of Punjab, has begun. After the partition, the ruling class, except for a few, in the new born sovereign state of Pakistan, unnoticed its glorious past in the field of *Pehalwani*. There were more than 300 *akharas* at Lahore in 1947, hardly 30 are still functioning properly.

Figure 2

Amir Butt (National Champion). Photograph by Author



Moreover, the number of *pehalwans* has reduced from about 6000 to 150-20 (A. M. Pehalwan 2015). It was challenging for traditional *akharas* to stay alive on inadequate state revenue or on voluntary aids. Financial survival of new comers was challenging because of the lack of funds (Hameed 1992).

The main factors for the decline of this game were government negligence and poverty that consign the glorious feats of wrestlers to fast-fading memory. Only a handful carry the torch for the next generation and few command the thousands of spectators of days gone by.

For years, the Great Gama family (Bholo Brothers) and their *akhara* cultured the talent of Punjab. Now, it has turned into a graveyard full of graves of renowned *pehalwans*, The Bholu Brothers are buried next to their centuries-old *akhara*. Sweepers clean the graves but the compound of the *akhara*, abandoned exercise room and small garden is full of scrap and trash now, which is an indication of the decay of the cultural sport of Punjab.



 Figure 3

Akhara of Bholu Brothers, Lahore.
Photograph by Author

Rendering to Abid Aslam, nephew of Bholu Pehalwan and son of Aslam Pehalwan, Jhara Pehalwan was the last renowned *pehalwan* of the Bholu family who won awards; furthermore, he cried out and uttered, "I cannot express about *Pehalwani*, it really hurts me. We have lost the entire splendour and it is agonizing to recall the golden days. Presently, there is no admiration for *pehalwans* and no more bread in the game, then why one should wrestle? It is difficult to be ranked number one in the world, despite your achievement nobody respects you even the management and the ruling class do not take care of you and your family remains hand to mouth, hence it is worthy to look after some business and earn money" (Aslam 2015). Due to disappointments in the field of *Pehalwani*, Abid Aslam, son of mighty Rustams, has picked up a business profession to earn his livelihood instead of his hereditary profession *Pehalwani*. He has a money exchange office and earns more than he ever could from wrestling.

In addition, the disciplinary routine of drill and life of the *pehalwans* is well defined by stern moral and ethical rules along with dominance over the self and sensuality. A *pehalwan* must be pious and should not ejaculate because semen is viewed as the main source of strength. Furthermore, a *pehalwan* must escape from drugs such as tobacco, alcohol and spicy foods. Wholly, these things are supposed to enrage the passion of a person and most of the people loose self-control. Excess of drugs and spicy food also affected the cultural sport of Punjab. For instance, the last famous *pehalwan* Zubair Aslam named Jhara Pehalwan, son of Aslam Pehalwan (Rustam-i-Punjab) who belonged to the well-known Great Gama family of legendary *pehalwans*, joined the Bholu Brothers later when they had almost pensioned off from professional

Pehalwani. He was a great replacement for them but he did not labor well. Definitely, he was the finest in Pakistan and was taught by the top *Khalifas* (trainers) of *Pehalwani*, as well as Arshad Bijli. His foremost objective of life was to overthrow Inoki, great wrestler of Japan, who had beaten his uncle Aki Pehalwan. After this triumph, he was the greatest *pehalwan* of Pakistan but his companionship ruined him. Due to surplus of money, he became addicted to drugs. In a fashion, Jhara Pehalwan died on 11 September 1991, at the age of 29 due to heart attack and the last chapter of Pehalwani tradition was sealed (Chaudhary 2010).

Distinguished *pehalwans* of Lahore consider Pehalwani as a fading tradition of Punjab and their views are important to understand the causes of this dying tradition of Punjab. According to Amir Butt “I have a small number of trainees who exercise with me but youngsters do not want to become Pehalwans. Youth used to say ‘why should one en route to Pehalwani? It has no future, no money’. Further, they cannot meet the expense of daily special diet to increase power and uphold their weight. Many people have not the funds for Pehalwani in a country where there is huge joblessness. It has become very expensive to become a Pehalwan of fine quality because it costs at least 2500 rupees a day only for food and nobody from the middle class cannot afford it” (A. Butt 2015).

Khalifa Babar Pehalwan says, “In the non-existence of proper amenities, Lahore has not hosted any main *Dangal* in the last five years and he has intensely discouraged his son and nephews from coming towards inside the *akhara* because he thinks there is no future in it” (Ka 2015). All these issues have isolated the traditional sport in Lahore. Additionally, the dying mode of *Pehalwani* is most probably damaging the topophilia of Lahore.

Basant

Apart from *Pehalwani*, the people of Punjab warmly greeted *Basant*, mother of all festivals, beforehand a few years ago. A week before the festival, the biggest stock of kites reached in the market with the newest quality of local and imported *pinnahs* (bobbin) and *dor* (twine). “Bo-Kata” a typical shout of victory while flying kites, boomed in the atmosphere when young people came on their rooftops in the *Basant* festival. It is claimed that there was no other place in the world where

kite flying as a sport had attained such commanding heights as in the city of Lahore in the recent past. Most importantly, it was a key festival in nurturing the tophophilia of Lahore among its people.

It is not known exactly when and how Lahore owned this festival of kite flying but the activity has increased during the last decade of the 19th century in the city, making Lahore a principal center of the kite-festival. The very mention of kites in Lahore awakens one's memories of childhood (Siddiqui 2005).

***Basant* - A Controversy among Historians**

Lahore, according to legendary history, is the place of origin of the *Basant* Festival in the Punjab since ages. We do not know whether it was being officially celebrated during the Mughal period or not.

There are a few other, mostly doleful and factually weak evidences, associated with *Basant*, as a Hindu celebration that is against Islam. Undoubtedly, a very large number of essays, newspapers and books have been written that propagate the deliberately false beliefs declaring the celebration of *Basant* as an act of blasphemy and link it with *Kufr* (apostasy).

At the start of the 20th century, three Bengali writers, in their contradictory accounts, put forward the thesis that the *Basant* festival celebrated the sacrifice of Haqiqat Rai. He was the boy who chose to die instead of converting to Islam, when given the choice (Chaudhry 2001). However, they did not mention the fact that the festival had been celebrated for more than two hundred years before Haqiqat Rai and numerous references are present in history, poetry, literature and paintings (Hameed 1992).



Figure 4

Literature on *Basant* from 2004-2010

The celebration of *Basant* in Lahore existed before the death of the Hindu boy. The fact that he was put to death on the day of the festival, however, did not establish a link between his demise and the festival but in 2004, Nawai Waqt newspaper projected the theory that *Basant* was in fact a celebration of violation committed by Haqiqat Rai (Chaudhry 2001). This concept quickly gained support with the religious prophets and comfortable chair historians of Pakistan. More than a dozen books were published between 2004 and 2010 criticizing *Basant* as a festival celebrated against Islam. None of the books cited any sources, which associate *Basant* with the tradition of Sufis. These shaky evidences with no timelines challenged historical accuracy.

Apart from these evidences, it is a fact that *Basant* was celebrated throughout the Punjab with the arrival of the spring season. It is now more of a festivity for the public. Sometimes it is also termed as a Hindu festival, a wasteful spending and against human rights laws but its celebrations in Lahore were worth seeing. The city of Lahore, as a custodian of this cultural tradition of Punjab, celebrated the occasion most jubilantly, regardless of the negative analysis and going into its history and association with any caste or creed. Concisely, along with *Pehalwani*, *Basant* is the main constituent of the topophilia of Lahore..

***Basant* and Old Lahore - Basis of Topophilia**

Basant is eminent all over Lahore but the real festival is associated with the Walled City, also known as *Porana* Lahore (Old Lahore) (Mehdi 2015). It is here that *Basant* is celebrated with craze and passion. The old city's *Basant* had historically allowed a fair and equal involvement of the rich and the poor, the old and the young. During conflicts, it was *Basant* which brought people together because of its secular nature (Rehman 2015). Therefore, love replaced hatred in warm hearted Lahoris. Therefore, it can be rightly stated that it was the base of the topophilia of Lahore.

Basant has gradually grown into a celebration of massive proportions in the historic city of Lahore. The preparations for the day start weeks earlier and as the festival draws closer, colorful kites are available for sale, practically, in every street. The variety of shades and colors of all types of kites assail the eyes, small kites, medium kites and big kites. There are special markets in the Walled City where wholesale business

takes place and retailers from other cities and localities procure the bulk supplies, weeks before the actual celebrations start. The major commercial groups in the city celebrate the festival in a big manner by way of sponsoring parties to advertise and market their products. They not only publicize their brand names but also make all out efforts to have maximum exposure in the press and media. Popular give-aways by the companies on the occasion are kites with *dor*, t-shirts, yellow caps and colorful balloons. It is a diversion for the youngsters to enjoy and spend their time without indulging in undesirable social activities.

Ban on *Basant* - Damaged Topophilia of Lahore

Many discussions were held before the ban on *Basant* and a Senior Advocate M. D. Tahir of the High Court filed writ petitions (Mehdi 2015). He took the matter before the High Court of Lahore. M. D. Tahir took the following main arguments against kite flying in the court: carnival of *Basant* may graciously be banned being the custom and tradition of Hindus, that the respondents be kindly ordered to formulate the law and stop the kite flying which creates danger to the life and person of youngster besides electricity break down and injury to the public by firing with the firearms including the dangerous weapon, Kalashankov, 12 bore and other rifles (Siddiqui 2005).

In response to the petition, the Prohibition of Kite Flying Ordinance was promulgated in 2006. The Sharif brothers, raised in Lahore and its environs and known for their love for Lahori food and greed, displayed a curious hatred towards *Basant*, a festival in which food plays an important part. The ordinance was re-promulgated in 2007 and the Punjab Assembly passed the Punjab Prohibition of Kite Flying (Amendment) Act, which banned flying, manufacturing, selling and trading in kites and associated things (Shehzad 2015).

In 2009, the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, briefly lifted the ban on *Basant*. In an interview, Taseer said that *Basant* was an important part of the culture of Punjab and should be celebrated as a big cultural event. "Depriving us from celebrating *Basant* is tantamount to depriving us of our fundamental rights" (Salman Taseer).

He vowed to celebrate the festival himself and open the gates of the Governor House to the public who wished to join him in the festivities.

His interview upset many people and Taseer was warned that he would be arrested and the Governor House besieged if he went ahead with his plans of celebrating *Basant* (Chaudhry 2001).

The year 2009 was the last year in which the festival was celebrated in Lahore. The Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) led local government restored the ban in 2010. The prohibition on one of the last remaining ways for having fun for Lahoris has been in place since that time. In 2013, the Caretaker Chief Minister tried, unsuccessfully, to restore *Basant* celebrations.

Figure 5

A shop after ban on *Basant*. Photography by Author

In 2014, the government decided to move the festivities out of the Walled City to the forests of Changa Manga. The celebration was cancelled at the last minute (Shehzad 2015). Therefore, it is an intentional effort of the government to alienate Punjabis from their rich culture. The ban on *Basant* is a great loss in terms



of economy and in the cultural aspect. Due to the ban, new generations are forgetting this historic tradition and indulging in other harmful activities. In short, love for Lahore has been damaged because there were thousands of people who loved Lahore only for its vibrant culture.

Furthermore, Lahore's economy was devastated after the ban on *Basant*. Around 500,000 families, directly related to the kite flying business, have lost their sources of livelihood. The ban is costing them Rs. 200 million annually and at the same time damaging other businesses that are indirectly related to the festival. The people related to the industry, including kite makers, twine (*dor*) makers, wholesalers and retailers, had lost their means of earning a living.

Muhammad Siddique, who used to sell kites two years ago in the Walled City, said that he was now working as a laborer. "I never thought that my business could be ruined like this and I would become a laborer", he said, adding, "We need to accept that we collectively failed to stop the chemical-coated twine that killed so many people" (Bisharat 2015). Moreover, key issues and concerns raised by the police

and local government seem to be reasonable and manageable. For instance: firstly, the dangerous twine is a major threat to the lives of the people. Certain vendors prepare dangerously sharp twine to fly kites, using both metal and glass clippings. This can cause serious injuries, especially to motorcycle and bicycle riders. Secondly, aerial firing carried out during the celebrations, mostly using unlicensed arms, results in casualties. Thirdly, the demand for electricity, during the night of *Basant*, cannot be met with and overloads the system, causing an energy crisis. Lastly, children are prone to accidents while flying kites on rooftops and running to grab falling kites on streets.

The concerns, while valid, are easily addressed with very little effort and proper governance. Kite flying associations and enthusiasts have long advocated simple measures that will eliminate purported dangers and make the sport of kite flying safe and probably safer than, say, playing cricket. The measures are easy to apply, for instance, an enforced ban on dangerous twine, suspension on bike riding for a twenty-four hour period (as on other occasions), designation of safe areas for kite flying, ban on aerial firing, public awareness campaigns and mobile generators for load balancing.

Conclusion

Apart from a great number of traditional festivals, fairs, games and other cultural traditions, *Pehalwani* and *Basant* are the two most important cultural traditions that have popularized the image of Pakistan throughout the world. Lahore has remained the hub of these cultural traditions and amused many people within the country and outside the country. Many people used to come to Lahore from far-flung areas just to celebrate *Basant* and to watch the *Dangals* of various *Pehalwans*. Presently, these two traditions of the cultural heritage of Punjab are in its dwindling phase due to several tangible and intangible reasons and in turn, the topophilia of Lahore is being damaged day by day.

Dynamics like modernisation has affected the cultural stream. Here I am reminded of what a rural woman once said: "*Rab kare oho wela away, jad jatti mem sab bun jaway*" (I pray the Lord that time comes when the peasants would become westernized) (Suvorova 2011). That woman is no more but her wish expressed accidentally has been largely fulfilled. The modern Punjabi has become westernized at the expense of his

language, arts, culture, traditional values and customs. The flood of westernization has swept away almost all traces of traditional art and culture. The imitation of the west has led to the craze for urbanization, which resulted in alienation of old intra-communal and intra-lingual ties.

In short, the negligence of the government also played an important role in diminishing these two traditions. No doubt, governments are working for industrialization and infrastructure but their budgets have nothing to do with the departments of culture and sports. The budget of these departments is so low that nothing can be done for the promotion of culture. Besides this, in the case of *Basant*, it is a deliberated effort of the government under the banner of Islam and human rights. Worriedly, the festival that had been celebrated without harm for seven centuries in Lahore and more than eight centuries elsewhere, became dangerous all of a sudden towards the end of the 20th century.

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