

## BASANT MANQUE

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**F.S.Aijazuddin.**

THERE are moments in a city's life when its performance sometimes equals its reputation. Lahore, once synonymous with Learning and the Arts, showed that when called upon, it can exceed expectations. The Lahore Literary Festival defied armchair pundits by being held at all, by being a success, and after it was over, by leaving its audiences gasping for more.

The LLF was spread over three days, an ambitious adventure considering that each day contained six one-hour sessions, almost back-to-back, starting from 10.00 am until 6.00 pm, with musical entertainments on two evenings thrown in for those with any stamina left. The LLF commandeered not only the three auditoriums of the Al Hamra Arts Complex but augmented its capacity by converting an unused lobby into an intimate baithak.

For one shining, glorious weekend, the Alhamra Arts Complex (which won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1998) fulfilled the potential inherent in its imaginative design, as crowds milled through its open spaces, and famous names delegates basked in the soft winter sun on couches covered with shimmering yellow satin.

This was the celebration of Basant that officialdom had denied Lahore. A young student watched open-mouthed as every famous name he had ever heard about or read about in class passed before him in the flesh.

It would seem like namedropping to recite the names of the delegates. The accomplishments of each would take up many columns.

But a few made the LLF especially memorable: Vikram Seth – shorter than one expected, ineffably erudite, effortlessly brilliant; Zehra Nigah, a nightingale who trills poetry and has a gossamer-like temperament; Shobhaa De, the Taliban's nightmare – an educated, liberated, articulate female; Zia Mohyeddin, for whom the word timing was invented; Mira Nair, who loves Lahore only less than Lahore dotes on her; Shahzia Sikander, who deserves to be fed praise, not cups of hemlock; and Vali Nasr, the erudite bureaucrat turned academic, whose specialty is Af-Pak affairs, and whose multi-faceted versatility reminded his audience of Shashi Tharoor, without the uxoriousness.

Considering their individual expertise, each speaker would have had every right, once handed the microphone, to speak interminably, but it was a credit to their mature self-restraint that each spoke with economy, to the point and with riveting clarity. Each hourly session began on time, ended on time, and before each event there was an orderly queue of attendees. Lahoris could not have been better behaved.

The range of topics that were tabled for discussion by more than 100 delegates – drawn from all over the world – could not have been more eclectic.

Where else in Pakistan would have been able to watch Shahzia Sikander showcase her talent, or to see on a large screen her breathtaking installation, in which the horizon gradually fragments into starling-like shapes that sweep across the sky in changing shapes, and then disappear in an echo of colour?

Where else could one have heard an informed civilised debate on Afghanistan by a panel consisting of a former ambassador to the US (Maleeha Lodhi), Ahmed Rashid whose textbooks on the Taliban are now mandatory reading; the articulate former Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar; and Vali Nasr?

They held their audience enthralled, and when their session ended, people wondered why the government does not surrender its foreign policy to them, rather than fumble with it itself.

Where else could one have heard two South Asian designers exchange views – India’s Rajeev Sethi and our own Noorjehan Bilgrami? Both have become international names.

Where else would one have heard on the role of ‘satire in society’ by Jugnu Mohsin – Pakistan’s answer to Joan Rivers?

And where else would have the wife of a serving chief minister – Tehmina Durrani – talk about her latest book Happy Things in Sorrow Times? Some wondered whether the title had been a subconscious comment on LLF’s contribution to our political circumstances.

The final session focused on the war on culture. The four-member panel was moderated with a deft touch by the deceptively fragile Mishal Husain of the BBC. She in turn was introduced by US Ambassador Richard Olson who found himself afterwards having to answer barbed questions from young men – two irrepressible voices from the back rows of Fata and South Waziristan.

The LLF ended, borne aloft on a tsunami of goodwill and bonhomie. Crowds left the auditoriums and then milled about in the open areas, reluctant to go home. Could there have been a greater tribute accorded by Lahore to itself?

Three brothers – Razi, Fasih, and Attiq Ahmed – headed the team of LLF’s organisers. This fertile trinity gave form to a spirit, and to Lahore its lost Basant.