

Lahore getting set for mega event of Basant

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By Shoaib Ahmed

LAHORE: Excitement abounds in the city, as Lahoris prepare to welcome spring in the traditional manner with the kite flying festival, or as it's better known, Basant.

The festival dates back to when farmers would celebrate the blooming of mustard crops in their villages, the sign that winter had ended, by cooking special local dishes and performing traditional dances. Nowadays, Basant has become a huge event and attracts tourists from all over the world to the Punjab, particularly to its capital.

The event has become so popular in fact, that this year it will last three days. Previously, it was marked by the flying of kites on the night before Basant and the next, with particularly zealous enthusiasts going without sleep and sticking to their rooftops the entire time. Night Basant has its own charm, the black sky peppered eerily with white kites and the stars in the backdrop.

They don't provide the only illumination though, with many people fixing powerful searchlights on their rooftops.

The austerity and simplicity of white against black is quite in contrast to the next day, when people get their flashy kites out and the sky is painted with all the colours of a kite-maker's palette. And the kites don't come in one shape either; who can resist when they have names like Patang, Doli, Parri, Mucher, Sharla, Kup and Lakhnao Cut? The day is also a cacophony of drums, bugles and virtually every genre of music, Lahoris refusing to celebrate anything quietly.

The city is currently gearing up for the festival. Kite shops in the old city are doing brisk business, and the rooftops of all the big hotels in the city have been booked for private parties.

The All Pakistan Kite Flying Cultural Association (APKFCA) held a competition here at Race Course Park on January 28, just to whet the appetite. Talking to Daily Times, APKFCA Chairman Nadeem Wyne said the association came into being six years ago to promote the kite-flying game. Eight teams of 24 players each are participating and the chairman promises there will be more competitions, starting from February 1. He commended the Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA) for organizing the competition.

Lahore Kite Flying Association (LKFA) President Malik Muhammad Shafi told DT of the prices of the equipment needed for Basant, kites and dor (a cord or string used for kite flying). Apparently, a good-quality Patang will set you back Rs 30-100, as will some of the bigger kites. A good dor per costs Rs 500–1000 per chakee. Mr Shafi said prices had risen since Basant caught on in the posher areas of the city, such as Defence, Model Town and Gulberg, and broke out of its traditional enclave in the old city.

According to members of the various kite flying associations, the rates of rooftops in walled city localities vary according to the quality of kite-flying available in the area and the capacity of the rooftop. For example, in Mochi, Lohari, Bhatti Taxali, Yakki and other gates, rooftops are being booked at Rs 50,000 to Rs 100,000 a night. In Shah Alam, rates are higher at Rs 100,000 to 400,000 because of the presence of professional kite fliers and the larger rooftops. However, they are put in the shade by Heera Mandi, where rooftops are being rented at up to Rs 700,000.

A Lahore Basant mela has also been organized by Syed Zulfiqar Ali, an office bearer of the All Pakistan Kite Flying Association (APKFA). An international seminar at the Lahore Museum on February 6 and 7 is part of the mela, and will feature the participation of expatriate Pakistanis.

The Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) is waging a huge awareness campaign against metal-wire kite flying this year, particularly aimed at the younger generation. Several die each year when these metal dor kites get entangled in electricity wires, apart from causing power cuts.

Yousuf Salahuddin, famous for the Basant parties at his haveli from 1986 to 1992, told Daily Times the revitalization of the festival has greatly boosted the city economy. It generated Rs 1.5 billion in revenue last year and this figure is expected to top Rs 2 billion this year. However, Mr Salahuddin complained that Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and the tourism department were not doing enough to promote the event. He said neither had introduced an appropriate package to attract foreign tourism.

He feels it is a particular shame because highlighting Pakistan's rich cultural heritage with the promotion of such festivals would boost Pakistan's image abroad.