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Land of the Killer Kites

by Carol Rose

Lahore seemed like a long way to go just to fly a kite. Staring down from the window of the Boeing 737, I tried to find the five rivers of the Punjab province -- "punj" meaning "five" and "ab" meaning "water." Instead I saw the dome-topped minarets of Lahore's mosques piercing the skyline -- Islam's version of New England church steeples. Above the rooftops floated thousands of tiny colored dots, like M&Ms suspended in mid-air.



Kite flying in Lahore.

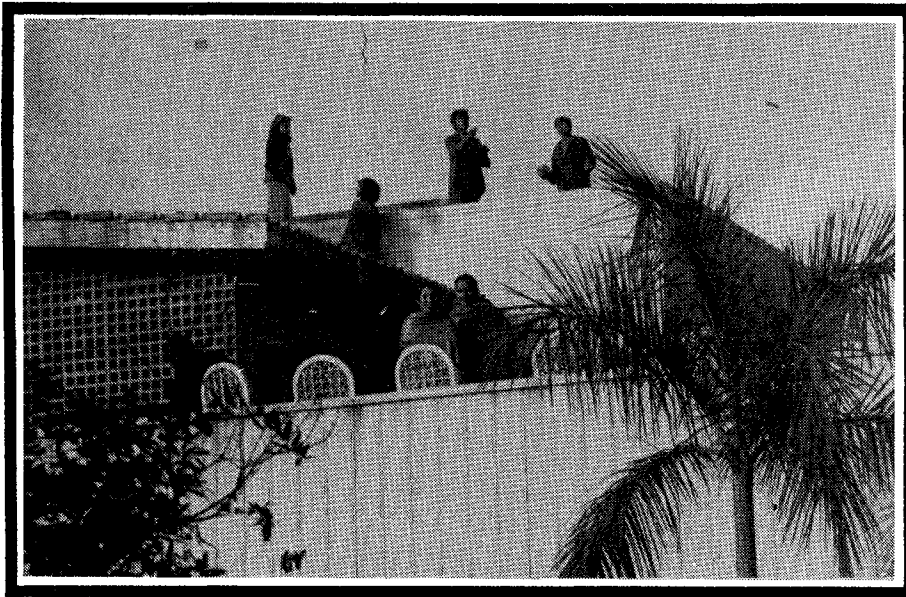
It took me a minute to realize they were kites. Floating all around the airplane, they turned the sky into a giant carnival -- and a serious flying hazard. Kipling called Lahore "The City of Dreadful Night"; a better name might have been "City of Killer Kite."

Suddenly, a string hit the outside of my window. I watched it wrap around the wing of the airplane, trailing a pink kite behind it. The plane dove into a cloud bank, pulling the kite along. I wondered which would prove stronger, the kite or the airplane wing.

"Allah Willing, we will soon land," said the prerecorded announcement over the loudspeaker.

Thus blessed, we landed safely. So did the kite. As the plane taxied to the gate, clusters of airport workers huddled around kites that had

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Kite flying defines the flat-roof architecture of Lahore, illustrated by the Peerzada family house.

been dragged on to the tarmac. The workers were collecting kite string.

"Man, you guys should've been here last night," said my friend, Steve Masty, who met us at the airport. "It was raining, but we were up on the rooftops using searchlights to find other guy's kites and bring them down."

Masty is an American writer, satirist and cartoonist working in Lahore with Pakistani film director, Salmaan Peerzada. He invited me and Tom for the weekend to meet Peerzada -- and to see the annual Besant kite festival.

As we drove to Peerzada's house on the outskirts of town, kites were everywhere -- in the sky, in the trees and in the telephone wires overhead. Dozens of young boys swarmed around falling kites. They carried bamboo poles with tree branches tied to one end.

"Those long poles are kite catchers that the poor guys use to steal kites," said Masty.

We stared as another horde of kite-nappers thundered past, their crude bamboo poles bobbing like spears above their heads. "Kinda feels like we're in the midst of a peasant revolt, doesn't it?" said Masty.

Calling Besant a peasant revolt is pretty accurate. Although no one I spoke with seemed to know the origins of the kite festival, all agreed that it was the only holiday in Pakistan that has nothing to do with religion or the State.

"This is the only festival we have that isn't solemn," said one kite-flyer. "It has absolutely nothing to do with religion. Even the mullahs can't make Besant go away."

Not for lack of trying. Many of Pakistan's Islamic religious leaders, or mullahs, condemn Besant, arguing that it is a Hindu festival dating back to the time before independence in 1947 when Lahore was a city of both Hindus and Muslims.

"That's nonsense," said Jabine Peerzada, Salmaan's wife and sometime actress. "Just because Besant isn't Muslim does not make it Hindu. Besant predates even Hinduism. It is as old as kite-flying itself. The festival is a celebration of Spring -- of resowing and rebirth. A happy festival in which everyone wears the yellow, orange and gold colors of the mustard flowers."

That description certainly fit the scene when we arrived at the three-story Peerzada house. Children and adults waved to us from the rooftop as we pulled into the drive. "Where have you been?" they called. "It is already afternoon -- we have been up here since morning!"

Rock and roll music blared from a stereo that had been set up on the roof top terrace, alongside a sofa and chairs. Dozens of children raced around the roof, climbing to a higher balcony and then jumping back down to where we stood. The women wore bright yellow, gold and orange shalwar kameez, traditional pajama-style suits, with long gauzy scarves flowing around their shoulders. They laughed and talked freely with the men and did not cover their heads, a delightful departure from the veiled and secluded women of Peshawar.

Salmaan introduced me to his brothers: Usman, a film producer and well-known actor, and the twins -- Sadaan and Faizaan -- who are puppeteers, artists, businessmen and fanatical kite flyers.

On neighboring rooftops, similar parties were taking place. "Kite-flying defines the architecture of Lahore," said Usman. "A house must have a rooftop terrace, preferably with many levels for flying kites."

Despite the festive atmosphere on the rooftops, I soon realized that kite fighting is the real attraction of Besant. The idea is to cut the string of other kites. In order to do battle, kite string is coated with ground glass to enhance its cutting power. The kites themselves are made by hand using

imported tissue paper and bamboo.

Faizaan showed me dozens of kites the Peerzada family had purchased for Besant. Each kite had a unique color and design. There were kites for fighting and kites for leisurely flying. White kites made up the arsenal for night combat, while the red-green-and-black kites represented Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party.

Having the correct kite and string is only part of the strategy, said Faizaan. "The most important thing is technique," he said. I watched as Faizaan launched a red and black fighting kite: he worked the string of his kite, falling to one knee then standing up, spinning and twisting the string to maneuver his kite against thousands of others that flew overhead. "It is like two planes having a dogfight," he said. "It is, very ferocious."

"Ai-bo, ai-bo, ai-bo....Bokata!!!" he shouted, pulling hard on the string. "I got you!"



Kiting Fanatics: Sadaan and Faizaan Peerzada.

Everyone on the rooftop cheered as his opponent's kite fell to Earth. On a nearby roof, dozens of young men shouted gleefully as they, too, cut the string of another kite. Somewhere in the distance, people were shooting kalashnikovs -- hopefully in celebration.

"You can feel it the moment your thread has been cut," said Faizaan. "It is a subtle change in the tension of the string. A good kite flyer will have the reflexes to know it right away."

Watching the battles, I could tell when a kite string had been cut because the kite floated down from the sky like a leaf falling gently from a tree. Before it reached the ground, the kite-nappers appeared with their bamboo poles for the down-to-earth fight over who would get the left-over kite and string.

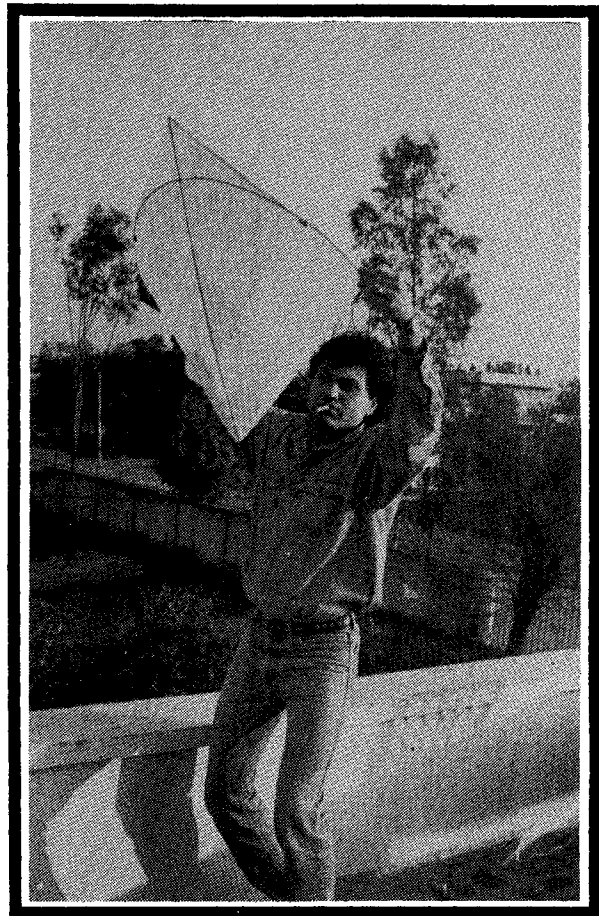
"The kite looter is a

kind of deprived human being who has so little string that he even hoards thread," said Sadaan, shaking his head in disgust.

"Then there are the Haat Maarna -- sleight of hand guys -- who use a small kite to reel in other kites, like a sword or F-16 swooping down to steal them," he said. "You often hear of guys being shot for such 'kite offenses'."

Other "cheaters" fly kites with copper wire in an effort to cut the string of other kites more easily. It is a technique with one big drawback: electrocution if the copper kite string touches the high-wire lines.

"Maybe Benjamin Franklin was from Lahore," said Masty. "Fortunately, when he flew his kite into the electrical lines there was load-shedding" -- a reference to the frequent electrical power outages around Pakistan.



Ready for lift-off.

I picked up a copy of the Penguin Book of Kites that someone had left on the balcony ledge. It said that kite flying had started in China 25 centuries ago, "contributing to man's need to extend his physical and mental reach...used for religious, ceremonial, divining, celebrating fertility, birth and destiny...for military observation, fishing and divining secrets of the atmosphere."

"Why do you fly kites?" I asked Usman Peerzada.

He smiled and said: "You send your soul into the sky with every kite you fly."

"And when your string is cut, what happens to your soul?"

"Once it is cut, your relationship with the kite is over and you can send your soul up another time."

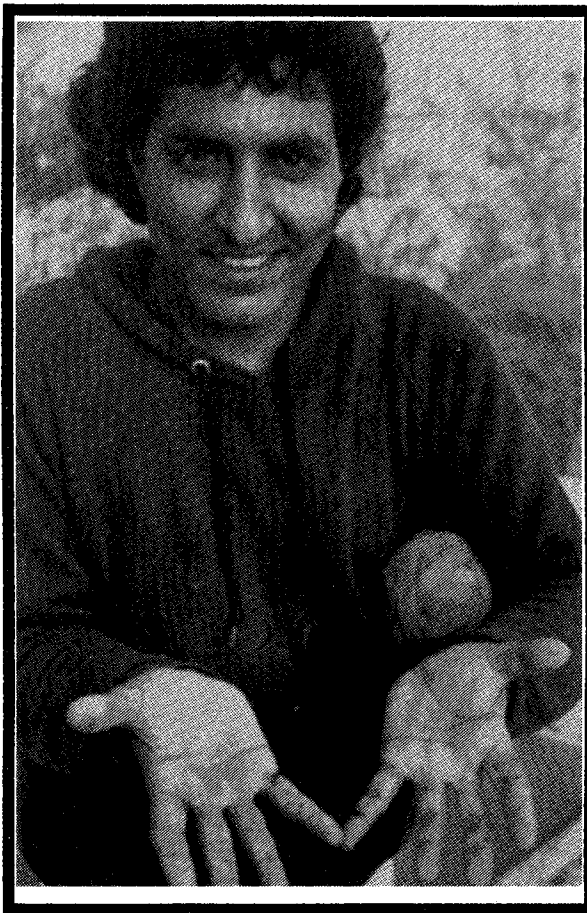
Kite symbolism is political as well as metaphysical. As the

sun edged toward the horizon, Sadaan and Faizaan announced that it was time to fly a kite decorated with the tri-colors of the Pakistan People's Party. We held our breath as they tried to set the kite aloft. It plunged into a nearby tree. Reeling the kite back to the balcony, they tried again, and again, and again...

"Life imitates kites," said Salmaan, referring to Benazir Bhutto's inability to get her opposition party off the ground. When finally they got the PPP kite into the air, most of the kite flyers had quit for the day. It was too late to put up a good fight.

By nightfall, the Peerzada brothers had flown more than 60 kites, lost 30 and "killed" more than 100 kites. Proudly, Faizaan and Sadaan showed off the bloody cuts that the glass-soaked kite string had carved into their hands.

"You can't discount the scars," said Sadaan, holding out his bloodied palms. "You have to be into it, like chess or soccer."



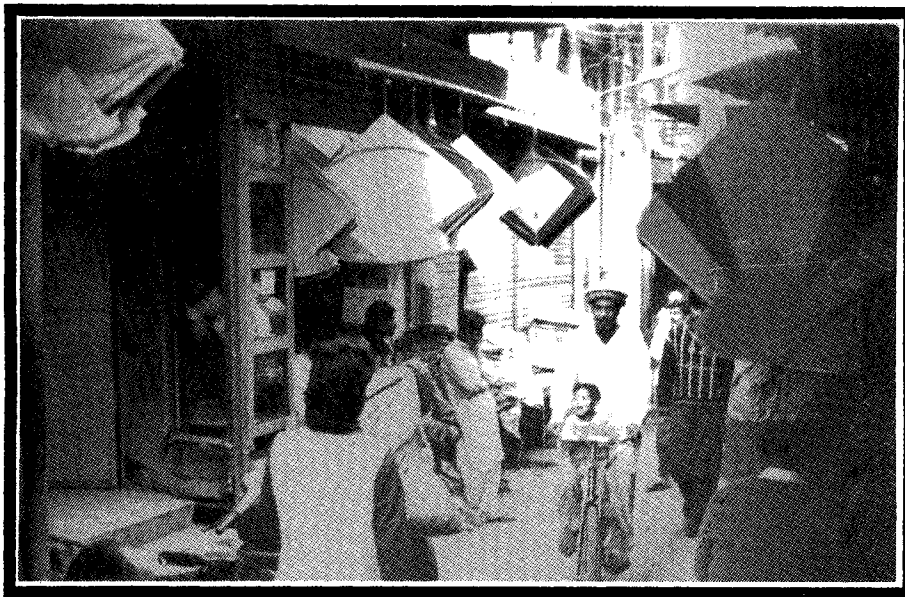
Sadaan Peerzada: "You can't discount the scars."

Faizaan, a painter, compared his technique to art: "It is like a brush stroke, everything depends on how you pull the thread," he said. "All people take pride in having their own way of tangling another kite. A good flyer is not interested in a quick victory. We like to see the technique of the other guy, the bends and twists of the kite five or six miles away."

Sadaan and Faizaan explained the fundamentals of kite fighting: use the thumb and forefinger to guide the kite, maintain the tautness of the string, catch your opponent's kite from the top, the relative speed of action is important: moving string cuts stationary string.

"And don't fall off the roof," added Sadaan.

As it turns out, others



Kite-seller's lane in Lahore's Old City.

could have used his advice. According to the Frontier Post newspaper, more than 200 people were injured flying kites on Besant. Four people died: one fell from a roof, one was electrocuted, and two ran into traffic while chasing kites.

The day after Besant, Sadaan took us on a tour of the kite district of Lahore's old city. We wandered through the narrow lanes, some no more than ten feet wide, lined on either side with tiny shops selling everything from firecrackers to bars of soap. Finally we entered the street of kite sellers. Hundreds of beautifully-colored kites hung on either side of the narrow lane. Kites were stacked from floor to ceiling in the kite shops.

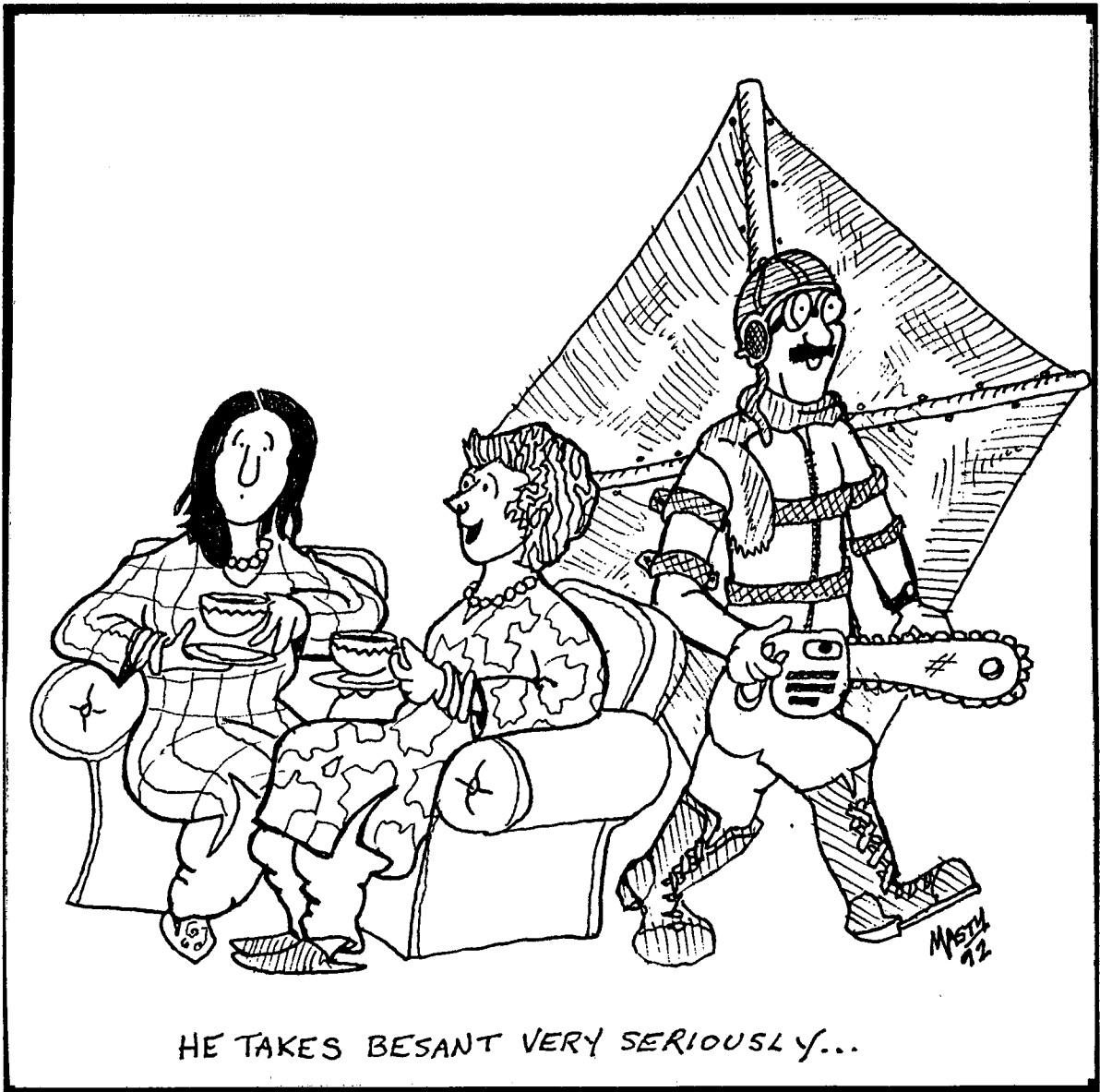
"I have 50 kite designs, ranging in price from one rupee to more than 600 rupees [4 cents to \$24]," said Saley Parwey, whose 10-by-10 foot kite shop was overflowing with kites. "I sold about 3 million kites this year."

Mr. Abdullah, a kite wholesaler, stopped by the shop to tell his side of the story: "I started out loving to fly kites and now I've become a millionaire because everyone else loves to fly kites," he said. "There are more than 1,000 kite shops in Lahore. This year, kite buyers spent more than 3,500 million rupees on kites [\$1.5 million]."

Behind Abdullah's millions are the men, women and children who actually make each kite by hand. In general, these are Pakistani villagers who are paid an advance sum to make them bonded kites laborers for three to four years. For simple kites,

the children and their parents work in groups of ten, making a kite in assembly-line fashion in about five minutes. Masters of the kite-making craft, however, will spend an entire day making one kite. Others crafts people spend hours preparing the kite string, imbedding it with glass and egg-whites to make it strong. Some kite flyers buy string scented with perfume.

Sediq, a kite maker from a nearby village, sat on the floor of the kite shop. He said he had been making kites for 12 years, since he was 16 years old. I asked him why he started making



HE TAKES BESANT VERY SERIOUSLY...

Cartoonist Steve Masty comments on Besant.



A craftsman glues bamboo and tissue paper to make a kite.

kites -- perhaps because he loved to fly them?

"Roti," he said. For food.

At that, Abdullah invited me to watch a kite-maker at work. Walking down the street, we turned into an alleyway that was no more than four feet wide. At the end, a young man sat at a low table in a darkened room, pasting together a kite. He worked quickly but methodically, using a cardboard pattern to cut the colored tissue paper. Then he cut a quarter-inch thick strip of bamboo from a stalk and held it over a candle flame, singeing black stripes on the cane so that the kite "would have beauty." He glued the bamboo to the tissue paper, his fingers moving deftly as he pieced the kite together.

"The bamboo comes from Thailand and Bangladesh, the paper comes from Norway, Germany, China, and Pakistan," said Abdullah. "But the material of the glue is a secret that the kite-maker will never reveal."

Actually, the craftsman said he used a combination of flour, water, sugar, salt and tree sap in his glue. But he didn't reveal the proportions.

As he worked, the women from his family sent down a message for me to come upstairs to meet them. Five flights of stairs above, ten women greeted me, served tea and then insisted that I

fly a kite by myself. As we climbed to the roof, I realized that the day after Besant was a day for the novice kite flyers -- mostly the women and children. Feeling confident that I understood the proper kite fighting techniques, I watched as my red kite fluttered amid thousands of other kites in the sky.

Suddenly I understood what Usman had said about sending your soul into the sky. My spirit rose with the kite, joining the great mass of anonymous beings floating above the rooftops of Lahore. The kite fluttered in the breeze, diving and twisting each time I pulled back on the string.

"Look out for that green one!" yelled the children. My attention was directed to the fight at hand. I planted my feet to steady my stance and maneuvered my kite above that of my opponent ... I pulled back on the thread ... let it out ... then yanked down with a knifelike thrust. The children cheered and yelled. Elated, I turned toward them smiling -- only to realize that they were laughing because my kite had been "killed."

I watched as my kite -- and my ego -- gently spiralled down to Earth. The kite string went limp in my hand. Glancing down, I noticed a tiny cut on my palm: a battle wound. I was elated. After all, you can't discount the scars.



Girls chase a falling kite.

Photos by Tom Harrington