Fraying Kites, Forged Joy: State, Modernity, and the Emotional Landscape of Spring in Lahore (1950–2010)

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Abstract

This analysis explores the complex relationship between seasonal spring festivals and the public expression of happiness in Lahore from 1950 to 2010. It investigates three central cultural events: the traditional kite-flying festival of Basant, the Sufi-affiliated Mela Chiraghan (Festival of Lights), and the state-sponsored Horse and Cattle Show. During the latter half of the twentieth century, these celebrations served as primary forums for communal joy, deeply tied to the agricultural rhythms of spring and the ripening of the wheat harvest. The Pakistani state, recognizing their potential, intervened by nationalizing or patronizing these festivals, beginning with the Horse and Cattle Show in 1954 and later Basant in 2000. These interventions aimed to advance specific economic interests and project a liberal, peaceful image of the nation, effectively shaping and channeling public happiness. Concurrently, rapid modernization—marked by urbanization, industrialization, and technological change—altered how Lahoris celebrated. New technologies like searchlights and chemical kite strings transformed Basant, while social shifts changed participation patterns. Despite these profound transformations and the eventual prohibition of Basant, the deep-welled cultural association between the spring season and the collective pursuit of happiness endured, embedding itself in the city's historical identity.

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The transformation of Lahore's spring festivals between the 1950s and 2010 reveals a fundamental, and often contentious, shift in the expression of communal happiness. Two primary forces, state intervention and modernization, acted as powerful catalysts, reshaping traditions that had long defined the city's cultural identity. Festivals, particularly those celebrated in spring, hold a profound significance in the Punjab, inextricably linked to the region's agricultural abundance and the sheer aesthetic beauty of the season. Traditionally, these celebrations were centred in the winding streets and rooftops of *Andrun-e-Lahore* (Inner Lahore), where the majority of the population maintained strong connections to agricultural rhythms. This deep-seated cultural equilibrium faced unprecedented pressure as industrialisation, rapid urban expansion, and technological advancements introduced entirely new forms of entertainment and social gathering, simultaneously threatening the viability of long-standing traditional practices (Waseem 2019, 48-60).

The rural communities of Punjab, whose economic livelihoods and social calendars were dictated by the agricultural cycle, historically demonstrated the strongest attachments to these seasonal traditions. The ripening of the wheat, in particular, was celebrated as a moment of profound joy and communal thanksgiving. The State of Pakistan, from its early years, strategically recognized the cultural and economic potential of these celebrations. It co-opted this energy, declaring several festivals as official state events to pursue economic development goals and project specific cultural policies. These state actions, while utilitarian in design, became powerful new sources of happiness and national identity for a diverse and rapidly growing urban population. This analysis illuminates the complex intersection of these traditional practices, modernizing forces, and deliberate state policy in sculpting the emotional landscape of Lahore's spring over six crucial decades (Naz 1992, 489-495).

This examination contributes to the broader historiography of emotions. Contemporary historians suggest that since the eighteenth century, the 'pursuit of Happiness' emerged as a by-product of revolutionary changes in Western human thought, exemplified by its inclusion in the American Declaration of Independence (Samuel 2018). This framework, however, often overlooks non-Western and non-secular pathways to joy. Happiness has also been intimately connected with devotional rituals and religious activities across diverse cultures. In colonial Punjab, for instance, devotional literature, *sama* (Sufi music), and *dhamal* (ecstatic dance) performances at Chishti Sufi shrines, as well as the practices at *melas* (festivals), actively promoted emotions of happiness through spiritual and communal engagement (Gull 2018, 89-112). This study bridges these avenues, examining how happiness was invoked and experienced through the complex interplay of secular, commercial, and religious dimensions of spring festivals. It fills a gap in scholarship that has often focused on either Western democratic contexts or the purely religious dimensions of emotional experience, rather than the messy, hybrid reality of a post-colonial society (Rosenwein and Cristiani 2017, 45-67).

Scholarship on Lahore's cultural history provides a rich, if fragmented, foundation for this inquiry. Foundational works, including M.S. Naz's descriptive *Lahore Nama* and Younas Adeeb's *Mera Shehar Lahore*, offer

invaluable, though often nostalgic, accounts of the city's traditions. These texts capture the essence of the *Zinda Dilan-e-Lahore* (the spirited or 'living-hearted' people of Lahore), preserving a cultural memory of communal celebration (Adeeb 2018, 134-150). Similarly, Nazeer Ahmad Chaudhary's focused monograph, *Basant: A Cultural Festival of Lahore*, provides a dedicated history of that specific festival, tracing its origins and traditional practices (Chaudhary 2001, 9-15). These works are indispensable for their preservation of cultural detail. However, they often prioritise rich description over a critical analysis of the powerful social, political, and economic forces, such as state intervention or the disruptive impact of modernization, that this study foregrounds.

Broader historical studies on emotion and South Asian culture provide the necessary analytical framework. Darrin McMahon's *Happiness: A History* traces the philosophical and political lineage of happiness as a concept, though primarily within the Western intellectual tradition (McMahon 2006, 1-49). This provides a crucial counterpoint to studies like Ayyaz Gull's exploration of *sama* and happiness at Sufi shrines, which grounds the emotion in specific, regional, and devotional practices within colonial Punjab. Furthermore, studies on post-partition identity and syncretism, such as those by Som Anand or Stephen Alter, touch upon the shared cultural spaces that festivals once represented. These works, however, often focus on the profound rupture of 1947 itself, rather than the complex, six-decade evolution of these cultural forms in the new nation-state (Anand 1998, 156-178). This work, therefore, synthesizes these disparate fields—urban history, the history of emotions, and post-colonial cultural studies—to analyse Lahore's spring festivals as a unique, long-term case study of joy under pressure.

This analysis rests on a foundation of primary archival research, primarily drawing from the contemporaneous print media of the period. A systematic examination of Urdu and English newspapers, including *Jang*, *The Pakistan Times*, *Dawn News*, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, and *Amroz*, was conducted for the period spanning 1950 to 2010. These archives, accessed at the Punjab Public Library and the Central Library of Government College University Lahore, offer a day-to-day chronicle of the festivals. They contain not just official announcements and schedules, but also public debates, commercial advertisements, letters to the editor, and journalistic accounts that captured evolving social attitudes. These print sources are particularly vital for documenting the complex intersection of state intervention, rising religious controversies, and the mounting public safety concerns that emerged with technological change, offering a multi-dimensional view of the festivals' transformation over time.

To complement the official and public record, oral history interviews provide an essential counter-narrative, capturing perspectives and experiences often absent from the printed page. Interviews were conducted with members of the Punjabi Adbi Board, including Parveen Malik, as well as with faculty members of the Punjabi Department at Government College University Lahore and library staff possessing institutional memory of the celebrations. These testimonies proved invaluable. For instance, they illuminated the changing status of women at Mela Chiraghan, detailing restrictions imposed during different political periods and the class-

based variations in female participation. These oral accounts revealed intimate details of domestic celebrations, the intergenerational transmission of traditions, and the raw emotional responses to government restrictions, providing a texture, depth, and human element that archival sources alone cannot (Malik 2022).

Traditional Celebration of Spring Festivals: Source of Happiness and Joy (1950s–1970s)

The significance of the spring season in mid-twentieth-century Lahore was not merely climatic but was profoundly emotional and economic, rooted in the agricultural lifeblood of the Punjab. The season signalled a time of tangible renewal and impending abundance. The ripening of wheat fields, transforming the landscape into a "golden expanse," and the brilliant yellow carpets of *sarson* (mustard) flowers were visceral, somatic symbols of prosperity. For the rural communities surrounding the city, whose entire economic survival depended on a successful harvest, spring represented the culmination of months of arduous labour and anxious anticipation. The joy expressed in the festivals was, therefore, one of profound relief, deep-seated gratitude, and a communal triumph over the inherent uncertainties of nature.

This agricultural emotion permeated the city. Urban residents, particularly those living in the dense, historic neighbourhoods of *Andrun-e-Lahore*, often maintained deep family, economic, or cultural ties to their rural hinterlands (Tufail 1962, 761-762). Participation in spring celebrations reinforced this vital cultural continuity, offering a necessary and grounding respite from the encroaching mechanization and abstraction of urban life. The association between the spring season and the emotion of happiness thus operated on multiple, intersecting levels. Agricultural abundance assured economic security for the entire region. The sheer natural beauty of the *sarson* fields inspired aesthetic pleasure and artistic expression. Finally, the festive gatherings that ensued strengthened the essential social bonds across families, neighbourhoods, and communities.

Basant emerged as the preeminent spring festival, a city-wide celebration perfectly timed with the blossoming mustard fields and the arrival of gentle breezes ideal for the sport of kite flying. The festival's very name, with Sanskrit etymology referring to the *kasam ka phool* or mustard bloom, anchors it directly to the agricultural cycle and the natural phenomena that marked the seasonal transition. Historically, the practice involved offering these yellow flowers at Sufi shrines and *devi devta* temples, an act that seamlessly interwove religious devotion with seasonal celebration (Chaudhary 2001, 10-12). This syncretic origin was key to its power, allowing Basant to transcend sectarian boundaries and unite Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in a shared cultural expression that prioritized a regional Punjabi identity and seasonal joy over rigid religious dogma.

Before the partition of 1947, this shared celebration was a hallmark of Punjab's famously composite culture (Anand 1998, 159-160). After the communal violence and demographic rupture of partition, Lahore, now the cultural capital of the new nation of Pakistan, gradually consolidated its role as the undisputed epicentre of Basant. The preparations became a serious, city-wide focus, beginning weeks, sometimes months, in advance. Families and neighbourhood groups began the meticulous process of

purchasing *guddi* (kites) and preparing *dor* (twine), organizing the rooftop gatherings that required securing and booking prime locations, and planning the elaborate food and music that would accompany the two-day festival. The entire city became singularly focused on the neighbourhood competitions and the spectacular, sky-bound battles to come.

The celebration of Basant in the 1950s and 1960s followed a vibrant and established cultural script. Participants, adhering to tradition, would don yellow clothing, a symbolic identification with the mustard flower that painted the rural landscape. The city's rooftops became the central stage for day-long, and often night-long, kite flying competitions. Favourable weather, such as the moderate winds reported in 1956 and 1962, was crucial and reported with great anticipation in the newspapers. These conditions enabled spectacular aerial displays and the intense *pecha* (kite-cutting) battles that captivated the entire city, from the active participants on the roofs to the thousands of spectators on the streets below (*Nawa-e-Waqt* 1962). The sky itself became a dizzying, colourful tapestry of kites, a visual cacophony punctuated by the triumphant, echoing cries of "Bo Kata!" (There it is cut!) that signified a successful "kill."

The festival was also a powerful social adhesive, reinforcing communal bonds in a growing city. Major families and established groups in *Purana Lahore* (Old Lahore) issued formal invitations to relatives and friends residing in the newly developing, often sterile, suburbs like Gulberg, Model Town, and Samnabad. This practice reinforced social ties and re-centered the old city as the cultural heartland, a place of authentic celebration. Prime rooftop locations on historic *havelis* (mansions) and tall buildings were booked months in advance, prized not only for their optimal flying positions but as venues for elaborate, high-status social gatherings (Adeeb 2018, 135-136). The event transcended class, even if it did not erase it; the wealthy hosted lavish, catered parties, while the poor participated with equal enthusiasm from smaller roofs and the streets below.

Basant engaged all age groups, albeit with clearly and traditionally delineated roles. Elder men, with their experience, managed the serious, high-stakes competitions, handling the valuable, sharply-coated *dor* with practiced and protected hands. Youths and young men, full of vigour and competitive spirit, demonstrated their flying skills, engaging in the athletic and aggressive *pecha* battles. Children, meanwhile, had their own parallel festival; they swarmed the streets and bazaars in frenzied, joyous packs, wielding thorny bamboo poles in a chaotic pursuit of *loot* (plunder)—the falling, liberated kites cut from the sky. Women's participation, in this period, was largely circumscribed; they adorned themselves in beautiful *Basanti* (yellow) *dupattas* and dresses, often observing the festivities and managing the social aspects of the gathering, but they generally did not participate directly in the male-dominated sport of kite flying (Chaudhary 2001, 20-22).

Mela Chiraghan, the "Festival of Lights," represented Lahore's other monumental spring celebration, a powerful counterpoint to the secular revelry of Basant. Held annually at the shrine of the 16th-century Sufi poet Shah Hussain in the Baghbanpura neighbourhood, it was a profound convergence of Sufi devotional practice and a broader spring harvest festival. This unique

blend of the spiritual and the seasonal attracted hundreds of thousands of participants, drawing massive crowds from every social and economic background. Unlike typical Sufi *urs* celebrations, which follow the lunar Islamic calendar, Mela Chiraghan is uniquely tied to the solar calendar, scheduled for the last Sunday of March (or the fourteenth of Bisakh), a scheduling that explicitly links the festival to the completion of the spring agricultural cycle and the wheat harvest (Tufail 1962, 762).

Historical tradition suggests the mela's origins are even older than the shrine itself, possibly connected to earlier spring festivals celebrated in the nearby, Mughal-era Shalimar Gardens. These existing traditions were likely merged with the commemorative practices for Shah Hussain after his death (Nath 1928, 76). Before 1947, Lahore's Hindu and Sikh communities participated in the mela with as much enthusiasm as Muslims. This reflected the city's deeply syncretic cultural traditions, where the festival functioned as a shared seasonal celebration and a space of inter-communal devotion rather than an exclusive, sectarian religious event. While this inclusive, multi-faith character inevitably diminished after the demographic transformations of partition, the mela retained its massive popular appeal and its profound spiritual and economic significance for decades.

The Ayub Khan government (1958-1969), in one of the first major state interventions in these traditional festivals, imposed significant restrictions on Mela Chiraghan. Celebrations were prohibited within the bounds of the Shalimar Gardens and physically confined to the corridor between the shrine in Baghbanpura and the Grand Trunk (GT) Road (Naz 1992, 493-495). This act substantially reduced the festival's geographic footprint and, many devotees felt, its carnivalesque and joyous atmosphere. Despite these state-imposed limitations, the popular devotion and festive enthusiasm of the people proved remarkably resilient. In 1969, for instance, newspaper accounts reported that visitor numbers still approached approximately two hundred thousand, a testament to the mela's enduring cultural and spiritual pull across diverse social classes.

The central ritual of the mela, which gives it its name, involves lighting the *mach* (sacred fire) on Shah Hussain's *dargah* (shrine). This creates a spectacular visual, as thousands of individual oil lamps (*chiragh*) and candles, lit and placed by devotees fulfilling vows, illuminate the entire shrine complex, the surrounding streets, and the homes of participating households. The neighbourhood is transformed into a sea of flickering light (*Amroz* 1985). This visual splendor was accompanied by ecstatic devotional performances: *dhamal* (a form of ecstatic, swirling dance) and the continuous singing of Shah Hussain's *kafis* (Sufi mystical poetry) by *fakirs*, dervishes, and devotees. These elements—light, music, poetry, and dance—combined to create an immersive spiritual and emotional experience, blending religious fervor with seasonal joy.

Rural agriculturalists, in particular, valued participation in the mela. For them, it was a critical opportunity to express tangible gratitude for a successful harvest, to fulfill spiritual vows (*mannats*) made during the uncertainties of the planting and growing season, and to seek blessings for future agricultural prosperity. This practice beautifully integrated the material and spiritual dimensions of happiness, reflecting a holistic worldview where economic well-

being and spiritual grace were inseparable. Notably, until the second half of the twentieth century, women participated actively and visibly in the *dhamal* performances alongside men (Malik 2022). This inclusive practice, central to the Sufi tradition of the shrine, would later face severe restrictions as a more austere, conservative brand of Islam gained political strength, fundamentally altering the mela's open and inclusive character.

Spring festivals were not just cultural and spiritual events; they were significant economic engines that provided livelihoods for thousands. The kite-making industry, in particular, constituted a vast, complex, and specialized ecosystem. It involved paper suppliers, bamboo importers (with much of the raw bamboo coming from East Pakistan, later Bangladesh), twine manufacturers, and specialized processors of glass and metal for coating the *dor* (kite string). Thousands of skilled artisans, for whom this was often a hereditary profession passed down through generations, produced millions of kites annually (Chaudhary 2001, 28-35). This industry was a repository of technical knowledge—about optimal paper weights for different wind conditions, precise frame geometries for maneuverability, and decorative styles that were both functional and breathtakingly beautiful.

The sheer scale of this industry was staggering. Industry estimates from the 1960s indicated that Lahore alone consumed approximately one million rupees worth of domestic and foreign paper annually, with a full seven percent of that dedicated specifically to kite manufacturing. Furthermore, approximately five percent of all bamboo imports into the country were utilized in producing kite frames. An artisan kite maker, working a ten-hour day during the peak season leading up to Basant, could earn about five rupees daily (*Jang* 1990). The *dor* makers, who purchased raw thread at modest costs and then coated it with their own secret formulas of glass powder or chemicals, saw the most significant value-addition. Their wages for a finished reel of *dor* increased from ten annas to three rupees during the 1960s, demonstrating the high profit margins available within this specialized, and increasingly dangerous, craft.

Mela Chiraghan, similarly, was a commercial behemoth in its own right. During the multi-day festival, newspaper reports estimated that approximately 5,000 temporary shops and stalls would spring up in the designated areas. These vendors sold a massive array of goods, including agricultural products, sweets, toys, crockery, entertainment services, and various other consumer items (Naz 1992, 495). Vendors of agricultural products, such as sugarcane and radishes, reported sales as much as 20 percent higher than during non-festival periods. This spike reflected both the mela's strategic timing with the harvest—when farmers had fresh cash from their crops—and the increased purchasing power of celebrating communities. Hundreds of temporary sweet shops employed thousands of workers, while food vendors, circus performers, *hakims* (traditional physicians) selling remedies, theatrical troupes, and ride operators all generated significant income from the massive crowds.

The economic multiplier effect of these festivals rippled outwards, far beyond the festival grounds. It touched transportation services (buses and wagons bringing people in from villages), temporary housing providers, and the entire supply chain for food, fuel, and manufactured goods. For

many labouring and artisan families, the festival seasons were not a luxury but a crucial, non-negotiable period of income generation that sustained them through leaner parts of the year. This deep, foundational interweaving of economic survival with cultural celebration reinforced the festivals' social importance. It also helps explain the fierce popular resistance to any modernizing pressures or state interventions that threatened these traditional and, for many, highly lucrative practices (Tufail 1962, 762).

Late twentieth-century cultural historians, such as Miri Rubin and those of the *Annales* school, increasingly recognized that understanding past societies requires moving beyond the study of elite cultural production and formal institutional histories (O'Brien 1989, 25-47). A society's values, social organization, and "emotional cultures" are often most clearly revealed through the study of its festivals, collective rituals, and celebrations. In Lahore, the spring festivals were precisely such a site. They were forums where agricultural communities expressed collective gratitude, where urban populations re-affirmed their connection to a rural heritage and the rhythms of nature, and where diverse social classes participated in a shared cultural experience that, however temporarily, bridged the growing economic and social divides of the city.

Lahore's unique historical identity as a cultural crossroads—where centuries of Sufi mysticism, Mughal courtly refinement, and vibrant, earthy popular traditions intermingled—created particularly fertile ground for such elaborate and deeply-felt celebrations. The very phrase *Zinda Dilan-e-Lahore* (the spirited, or "living-hearted," people of Lahore) captures the city's long-standing reputation for enthusiastic cultural engagement, hospitality, and a profound love for festive celebration. This identity was, and remains, a source of immense civic pride (Naz 1992, 489). Before partition, festivals like Basant and Mela Chiraghan exemplified this syncretic character, with Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims participating jointly, creating shared cultural spaces that fostered inter-religious familiarity and tolerance (Alter 2001, 134-156). Sufi shrines, in particular, served as nexuses of this cross-community interaction, reflecting a historically inclusive and pluralistic South Asian Islam.

After 1947, the trauma of partition and the massive, violent demographic shift that created a predominantly Muslim city fundamentally disrupted these syncretic traditions. While the festivals inevitably lost some of this multi-faith inclusive character, they retained their massive popular appeal and their economic weight. They became crucial sites for a transformed urban population to construct new, post-colonial forms of collective identity. These new identities were, perhaps by necessity, still partially rooted in a shared, pre-colonial agricultural heritage and the timeless, potent joy of seasonal celebration. This provided a much-needed sense of cultural continuity in a world that had been defined by radical, political, and social change.

Changing Priorities of People During Spring Season (1970s-2000)

The decades from the 1970s onward initiated a period of dramatic physical and economic transformation in Lahore, one that would fundamentally alter the city's spatial organization, economic base, and social composition. Accelerated industrialisation and urbanization, driven by government development policies, became the dominant forces of change. Before this period, vast

tracts of fertile agricultural land surrounded the historical walled city, and a majority of the population was engaged either in farming or in ancillary activities that supported agriculture. Lifestyles, for many, remained organized around seasonal cycles. During the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto era, government policies actively promoted industrial development, particularly on the flood-prone (and therefore inexpensive) lands near the Ravi River. This attracted a wave of private businessmen, who established the manufacturing facilities that would form the nucleus of Lahore's new industrial zones (Waseem 2019, 50-52).

Between 1980 and 2000, these industrial zones catalyzed a massive real estate boom. Urban development schemes aggressively and often speculatively converted agricultural lands into sprawling residential colonies, commercial districts, and industrial estates. Lahore's geographic footprint exploded (Shehzad 2015, 67-89). This physical transformation—the literal paving over of *sarson* fields to build housing colonies—was also a profound social one. It fundamentally altered the relationship between the city's population and the land, disrupting the seasonal rhythms that had structured traditional life for centuries. In their place, new economic opportunities, new forms of wage labour, and new social formations emerged, all of which would inevitably reshape cultural priorities and the very practices of celebration.

This urban expansion followed distinct spatial patterns. Development, which had initially been concentrated in the dense walled city, exploded southward and eastward, consuming former agricultural territories to create now-famous, and sprawling, neighborhoods like Samnabad, Gulberg, Nishtar Town, and Iqbal Town. Massive road construction projects were initiated to connect these new, distant zones to the old city core. These projects simultaneously created the chronic traffic congestion that would later be cited as a reason to curtail festivals (Shehzad 2015, 52-58). This congestion had a direct, negative impact on traditional celebrations. The narrow streets of *Andrun-e-Lahore*, the cultural heartland of celebrations, became increasingly choked with motor traffic, limiting the open spaces needed for mela gatherings and making the traditional "looting" of fallen kites a hazardous, traffic-snarled affair for children.

Concurrently, migration from rural areas and other cities into Lahore surged as industrialisation created a demand for new forms of labour. These new urban residents were seeking economic advancement, far removed from agricultural livelihoods. They brought with them diverse cultural practices, but they were all forced to adapt to a new urban lifestyle that prioritized wage labour, formal education for their children, and new patterns of commercial consumption over the rhythms of the harvest (Ali and Naz 2016, 104-116). The resulting social heterogeneity of the city was a double-edged sword: it created exciting opportunities for cultural synthesis and innovation, but it also created new tensions between traditional practices and modernizing pressures, fundamentally reshaping how spring festivals were imagined, organized, and experienced across different, and increasingly stratified, population segments.

Modernisation was not just a social process; it was a technological one that dramatically transformed the aesthetics, practice, and dangers of celebration. The 1980s and 1990s introduced a host of

innovations that created more spectacular visual displays while simultaneously generating unprecedented safety hazards. The introduction of powerful electric searchlights was perhaps the most significant, enabling night-time kite flying for the first time. This radically extended the festival beyond its daylight hours, creating a dramatic, entirely new, and surreal spectacle. Beginning in 1989, enthusiasts installed searchlights on their rooftops for "Basant rehearsals" on the Friday nights leading up to the main event, transforming the nocturnal cityscape with brilliant light beams cutting through the darkness, illuminating the special white kites that were flown for this purpose (*Jang* 1989).

This new form of nocturnal Basant was quickly formalized and commercialized. The Kite Flying Association, recognizing the immense popularity of this new trend, began organizing formal night competitions in public spaces like Minto Park and Jilani Park, utilizing existing field lights and supplementing them with searchlights. These events drew massive spectator crowds and received extensive media coverage. This innovation became a source of immense civic pride for Lahoris. Indian traders visiting Lahore, the other major center of Basant culture, reportedly expressed amazement at the night flying, acknowledging that Pakistani technological adaptations had surpassed their own. This innovation was widely celebrated as a symbol of national creativity and progress, turning the festival into a showcase of a uniquely Pakistani modernity.

Alongside lights, fireworks and firearms became increasingly prominent features of Basant celebrations from the late 1980s onwards. Participants used them to mark victories in kite-cutting battles, creating a festive, albeit chaotic, atmosphere through loud and brilliant auditory and visual displays. The practice of firing rockets and, far more alarmingly, firing guns into the air upon successfully cutting an opponent's string became widespread. This was particularly true among elite groups who possessed the financial resources for expensive fireworks and held licenses for firearms (*Jang* 1989). The combined sound of "Bo Kata!" cries, blaring music from loudspeakers, and the crackle of explosive fireworks and gunfire intensified the emotional, competitive experience, contributing to the festival's growing reputation for unrestrained, masculine, and dangerous celebration.

This reputation, however, came at a terrible and well-documented cost. These practices generated serious, and often fatal, casualties. Bullets fired in "celebratory" aerial firing would arc and descend miles away, injuring and killing unsuspecting people, including children, in distant neighbourhoods. Fireworks, often handled improperly in crowded and dry rooftop conditions, burned participants and ignited property fires. The provincial administration, alarmed by the escalating chaos, responded by imposing Section 144 restrictions, which prohibited the public display of firearms and the use of fireworks during Basant, threatening violators with arrests and fines. However, enforcement was notoriously inconsistent and lax. Many participants, especially the wealthy and powerful, continued these dangerous practices with impunity, highlighting a growing tension between traditional cultural expression, dangerous modern technologies, and the state's limited regulatory capacity.

The most lethal technological innovation, however, was in the *dor* (kite string) itself.

Chemical industries and specialized workshops introduced new, specialized kite strings coated with glass powder or, later, metal particles. These strings offered a superior, razor-sharp cutting ability in *pecha* competitions, transforming kite flying from a relatively benign recreation into an increasingly deadly one. These chemically-treated or "mirror" strings cost double the price of traditional, hand-made cotton *dor*, but they became the most prized possession for serious competitors. As one shopkeeper noted in a newspaper interview, "Despite having inflation, people's love for basant could never be ended...this string is considered best for kite's competition" (*Jang* 1990). Competitive priorities, fueled by a desire for victory and status, had superseded traditional safety concerns and economic rationality.

These strings caused horrific and predictable injuries. They inflicted deep lacerations on the hands of the flyers themselves, forcing participants to wrap their fingers in thick protective tape. Far more tragically, the strings, once cut and drifting, or simply stretched across streets by flyers, became invisible, high-tension blades. They killed motorcyclists, bicyclists, and even pedestrians who inadvertently encountered them at neck-level (*Nawa-e-Waqt* 1995). The strings also created severe electrical hazards, tangling in power lines and causing short circuits that led to widespread load shedding and power outages. WAPDA (the power authority) reported hundreds of such incidents on a single Basant day, which disrupted the electricity supply for thousands of residents (*The Pakistan Times* 1973). By the mid-1990s, the mounting death toll and infrastructure damage ignited a serious, public debate about Basant's very viability, pitting culture against public safety.

Modernisation's impact was also profoundly social, altering the very *purpose* and *meaning* of the festival for a new generation. Economic diversification and the massive expansion of the education system created a new, burgeoning urban middle class. This class's livelihoods and social identities revolved around wage employment, professional careers, and formal education, not agricultural cycles (Ali and Naz 2016, 105-108). This population had few, if any, direct connections to the harvest cycles that gave the traditional spring celebrations their original meaning. And yet, paradoxically, this new middle class embraced Basant with even more fervor than their rural-tied predecessors. The question, then, is why.

Basant, it turned out, was perfectly suited to evolve and serve the new social needs of this modern, urban population. It became one of the few occasions in an increasingly busy and compartmentalized urban world where extended families, neighbourhood groups, professional networks, and friendship circles could gather for a day-long, joyous, and relatively unstructured celebration. The festival's timing, in the pleasant, mild weather of late winter and early spring, continued to resonate emotionally, even for those disconnected from agriculture (Klautke 2010, 177-195). It offered a perfect, and largely "secular," excuse for a massive outdoor party, a stark contrast to the confinement of the cold winter months or the oppressive, immobilizing heat of the summer to come. It was, in short, the perfect modern festival.

Political figures and the wealthy business elite were quick to recognize and appropriate this new, high-stakes social event. During the 1980s and 1990s, they transformed Basant into a premier occasion

for displaying power, cultivating political and business networks, and projecting an image of liberal sophistication and cultural patronage. In 1989, Basant took on an explicitly political dimension as major political figures like Mian Salahuddin and the influential Pir Pagara organized massive, invitation-only celebrations in their historic *havelis*. They invited rival political parties, foreign diplomats, and media representatives to events featuring high-end musical performances, dance programs, and lavish buffets that demonstrated their immense resources and social connections (*Jang* 1989).

The presence of foreign ambassadors, such as Canadian Ambassador Mr. Mourferd and Japanese Ambassador Zchunji Haku, was eagerly reported in the press and served to provide a stamp of international legitimacy. Mr. Mourferd's comments to the media were particularly telling. He framed the festival as a "good sign of unity among people of Pakistan," contrasting it favorably with a perceived social fragmentation and individualism in his own country, Canada (*Jang* 1989). This elite appropriation and international validation helped turn Basant from a decentralized, popular cultural practice into a centralized, national spectacle. It became an event that served political legitimation and elite status display. This, naturally, generated sharp criticism from religious conservatives and populists, who saw such celebrations as wasteful, un-Islamic, and obscene extravagances.

Women's participation in Basant also evolved significantly during this period, reflecting the broader social changes and contradictions in Pakistani society. Historically, their role had been largely passive and observational—wearing yellow and managing the food and guests from domestic spaces while men dominated the rooftops. By the late 1980s and 1990s, this began to change, particularly among upper-class families and those in the arts and entertainment industry, who generally held more liberal gender norms. Some women began organizing their own Basant parties and, crucially, participating directly in kite flying, a significant transgression of traditional gender roles in public recreational practices (*Jang* 1989).

Actresses like Anjum and Gori hosted high-profile Basant celebrations in 1989, inviting colleagues from the film industry and other professions. These events demonstrated a new model of female public activity and social hosting that challenged traditional restrictions. The festival's multigenerational appeal also remained strong; newspaper accounts noted elderly women and grandmothers saving money throughout the year specifically for Basant festivities, indicating its deep emotional significance (*Jang* 1989). However, this expanded participation remained highly contested and was unevenly distributed across social classes. While cosmopolitan, wealthy households embraced mixed-gender celebrations as a visible sign of their modernity, many conservative and middle-class families maintained strict female seclusion. These diverse celebration patterns coexisted uneasily, reflecting the broader "culture wars" taking place in Pakistan's rapidly modernizing urban spaces.

Corporate and media organizations, recognizing Basant's immense popularity and commercial potential, moved in aggressively during the 1990s. They systematically transformed the festival into a powerful vehicle for product promotion, brand building, and revenue generation, intertwining cultural celebration with

commercial capitalism in unprecedented ways. *Jang News*, the country's leading Urdu newspaper, exemplified this trend by organizing high-profile, corporately-sponsored annual kite flying competitions. These events, such as 1995's "Basant k rang Jang and D-Cough Syrup k sang" (Colours of Basant with Jang and D-Cough Syrup), integrated commercial branding directly into the festival's nomenclature, turning the event itself into an advertisement (*Jang* 1995).

These corporate events, held at prominent public venues like Minar-e-Pakistan, were massive, professionally-produced entertainment spectacles. They featured musical performances by popular singers like Arif Lohar, who appealed directly to Punjabi cultural sensibilities, but were sponsored by pharmaceutical companies or soft-drink brands. This deliberately blurred the lines between a traditional community festival, a commercial promotion, and a mass-media entertainment event. This commercial exploitation was a reflection of the broader economic liberalization of Pakistani society, where consumer capitalism was increasingly shaping all aspects of cultural and leisure activities (Chaudhary 2001, 43-44). It also deepened the existing tensions between those who valued the festival's communal and spiritual roots and those who embraced its new, commercialized, and spectacular form.

The advent of private television broadcasting in the 1990s created yet another layer of mediation, establishing new forms of spectatorship and participation that had profound consequences. Televised coverage extended the festival beyond the physical rooftops of Lahore to a national, and even international diasporic, audience. This transformed intimate rooftop gatherings and neighbourhood competitions into mass media spectacles, consumed vicariously by millions of viewers. On one hand, this mediatization arguably democratized access, allowing populations (the elderly, the infirm, those in other cities) to "participate" through viewing. On the other hand, it fundamentally altered the celebrations themselves, as participants, hyper-aware of the circling news helicopters and rooftop cameras, began performing for a broadcast audience, adjusting their behaviour to suit the medium.

The economic stakes of this new, televised Basant were enormous. Broadcasting companies competed fiercely for ratings, and advertisers paid premium prices for commercial slots during the popular festival programming. This created a powerful new economic lobby—involving media houses, advertising agencies, and corporate sponsors—that had a vested interest in the festival's continuation and expansion. However, this high-visibility coverage had a fatal, unintended side-effect: it made the festival's most dangerous practices (the celebratory gunfire), its most "wasteful" elite extravagances (the lavish parties), and its most "un-Islamic" elements (music, dancing, and mixed-gender gatherings) hyper-visible to a broad national audience. This audience included the religious conservatives, who now had damning, easily accessible visual evidence to fuel their mobilization against a celebration they deemed morally objectionable and socially harmful (*Jang* 1990).

Islamic religious scholars and conservative political parties, such as Jamat-e-Islami, mounted an increasingly strident and effective opposition to Basant during the 1980s and 1990s. They skillfully characterized the festival as a "Hindu-origin"

custom, an argument with potent resonance in a nation founded on a distinct Muslim religious identity. They argued it was *bida* (innovation) and *shirk* (polytheism), an intolerable form of non-Islamic cultural infiltration that threatened Pakistan's religious purity and moral fibre (*Jang* 1996). Maulana M. Hussain Hazarvi of Jamait-e Tauheed-o-Sunnat declared that Basant represented "secularism and liberalism...which is strictly prohibited in Islamic Shariah," thus framing the festival as a symbol of the dangerous secular, Western, and Indian tendencies that undermined Pakistan's foundational Islamic character.

This ideological opposition was skillfully bolstered by a host of practical complaints. Religious leaders, in their Friday *khutbas* (sermons) in the weeks leading up to Basant, complained that the noise of the festival—the "Bo Kata!" shouts, the celebratory gunfire, and the ubiquitous loudspeakers blaring music—directly disturbed worshippers attempting to perform their Jummah prayers and other religious obligations (*Jang* 1989). These religious critiques, combining theological objections with practical grievances, gained significant traction among conservative urban and rural constituencies. These groups increasingly viewed Basant and similar cultural practices as tangible evidence of moral decline and a Western/Indian cultural invasion that required not just social resistance but active state intervention and prohibition.

This religious opposition did not operate in a vacuum. It formed a powerful and effective, if informal, coalition with two other, more "modern" groups: safety advocates and class-based critics. These groups all demanded government restrictions, or outright prohibition, for different but overlapping reasons. Welfare organizations and social activists deployed a potent populist argument: the millions of rupees expended on a single day of "wasteful" celebration could be used to fund marriages for poor families, construct schools and hospitals, or address endemic poverty (*Jang* 1989). This argument resonated strongly during periods of high inflation, when working-class families felt immense social pressure to participate in celebrations they could no longer afford, pushing them into debt.

Simultaneously, safety advocates, armed with horrifying, verifiable statistics from hospital emergency rooms, documented the mounting casualties from chemical strings, celebratory gunfire, and fatal falls from unregulated rooftops. They argued, rationally, that no cultural tradition could justify the annual death toll that Basant was now generating. WAPDA, the power authority, joined this opposition, highlighting the massive economic cost of infrastructure damage and load shedding caused by kite strings tangling in power lines (*Nawa-e-Waqt* 1995). This "coalition of complaint"—converging religious conservatives, safety advocates, welfare activists, and state infrastructure bodies—created a formidable, cross-spectrum pressure group that government officials found increasingly difficult to ignore, despite Basant's massive popular support and clear economic benefits.

Mela Chiraghan, while facing less of a safety crisis, experienced its own significant transformations during this period, which diminished its earlier inclusive and celebratory dimensions. Government prohibitions on celebrations along the GT Road, imposed from the late twentieth century ostensibly for "traffic management," substantially reduced the mela's geographic

scope and accessibility (Malik 2022). This confinement to the immediate shrine area and the Baghbanpura neighbourhood was devastating for the festival's traditional economy. Swing operators, toy vendors, food stalls, and entertainment providers lost their prime locations along the main road, forcing many to abandon participation entirely. The "traffic congestion" argument was seen by many devotees as a thin pretext, masking the discomfort of religious conservatives and state officials with the mela's festive, carnivalesque, and Sufi-oriented atmosphere.

The military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) imposed particularly severe restrictions, reflecting its state-sponsored project of austere, orthodox Islam. These restrictions included, for the first time, prohibitions on women entering the main shrine precincts during the mela period. This was a devastating blow to female devotees and a fundamental alteration of the festival's traditional gender dynamics (Shaheen 2019). This exclusion of women from rituals and *dhamal* performances, which they had historically participated in as a central tenet of Sufi devotionalism, marked a significant victory for conservative, state-backed interpretations of Islam over the more inclusive, indigenous Sufi tradition.

The new, "modernized" middle classes of Lahore, who were eagerly populating the new suburbs of Model Town, Gulberg, and Defence, also demonstrated a declining interest in Mela Chiraghan participation. Their new, Western-oriented lifestyles, educational backgrounds, and social aspirations created a cultural and class-based distance from Sufi shrine cultures (Malik 2022). Many in this new, upwardly-mobile class came to view shrine-based practices and mela celebrations as "backward," "ignorant" superstitions, incompatible with the rational modernity and scientific worldviews they were absorbing from new educational institutions and state development discourse (Khalid 2017).

As a result of this middle-class withdrawal, the class dimensions of mela participation became sharply and visibly marked. The withdrawal of elite and middle-class participation—and the resources, social prestige, and political influence they brought with them—left the festival dominated by working-class, rural, and marginalized populations. While their enthusiasm and devotion remained undiminished, they could not compensate for the loss of resources and social standing. Mela Chiraghan, while retaining substantial popular support among devotional communities, became a more niche, class-bound, and culturally contested event, reflecting the broader struggles over religious authority, cultural authenticity, and appropriate forms of Islamic practice in modernizing Pakistan.

State Intervention: Bringing Happiness During Spring Season (1954-2010)

The Horse and Cattle Show, unlike the organic, traditional festivals of Basant and Mela Chiraghan, was a state-initiated spring festival from its very inception in 1954. It was designed to serve clear, pragmatic, modernizing objectives while simultaneously creating a popular entertainment spectacle that would generate civic pride and a sense of national identity. General Ayub Khan, who would later become Pakistan's military ruler, first conceptualized the show as a mechanism for educating farmers about improved agricultural practices and modern livestock breeding techniques. The explicit

goal was to enhance rural productivity and prosperity, which was rightly seen as crucial for national development (Naz 1992, 505-506). The Director of Animal Husbandry, S.M. Sarwar, provided the technical expertise and institutional resources to realize this vision. The spacious and secure Fortress Stadium in Lahore Cantonment was chosen as the venue, providing military security and adequate infrastructure for large-scale exhibitions and public gatherings.

This new festival represented a strategic state appropriation and, crucially, a "democratization" of elite, colonial-era cultural practices. Pre-partition, elite hunt shows and military exhibitions were exclusive events, deliberately designed to reinforce social hierarchies by excluding the common population. By opening the Horse and Cattle Show to the general public and framing it as a national celebration accessible to all citizens, the new post-colonial state projected a populist image. It symbolically transcended colonial-era hierarchies and the privilege of the military-landlord nexus (Sheikh 1974). The official rhetoric surrounding the show celebrated the farmer as central to the nation's identity and prosperity, validating traditional knowledge while simultaneously introducing the modernizing interventions (like new fertilizers or breeding techniques) designed to transform that traditional life.

This dual character—simultaneously honouring traditional agricultural communities while promoting their transformation through modernization—reflected a core contradiction in Pakistani development ideology. This ideology celebrated rural culture rhetorically, yet its economic policies often undermined traditional rural economies and social structures. The show's massive and immediate popularity, however, demonstrated its success as a state-sponsored cultural intervention. The state had effectively created an entirely new form of spring celebration that resonated with the diverse desires of the populace for entertainment, education, and, most importantly, a tangible sense of national belonging during the formative, uncertain years of the new country.

The Pakistan Peoples Party government, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, fundamentally reconceptualized the show in 1973, aligning it with its potent socialist-populist ideology. Renaming it the *Punjab People's Festival* (*Awami Mela*), the government dramatically expanded its scope to include industrial exhibitions, pan-provincial cultural performances, sports competitions, and a diverse array of entertainment programs. This transformed the agricultural show into a comprehensive national cultural spectacle (Ahmad 1974). Bhutto's ideology emphasized mass mobilization and popular participation in national development. Cultural festivals were seen as crucial sites for demonstrating the government's commitment to the common people and for creating a direct emotional bond between the citizens and the state (*The Pakistan Times* 1974). The renamed festival, deliberately invoking "the people," signalled a democratic, inclusive ownership that distinguished PPP governance from the military and elite-dominated regimes that preceded it.

The 1973 festival was a monumental event by any measure, attracting an estimated 15,000 direct participants (performers, exhibitors, organizers) and drawing hundreds of thousands of spectators over multiple days. The expanded program was a masterclass in populist

nation-building and state spectacle. It included elaborate processions featuring large portraits of national heroes and war martyrs, imaginative floats representing Punjab's industrial and agricultural achievements, and mass physical demonstrations by thousands of uniformed schoolchildren. It also featured traditional wrestling matches, judo competitions, acrobatic performances, tent-pegging contests, motorcycle trick-riding exhibitions, and musical concerts, creating a diverse entertainment appealing to every conceivable taste and demographic (*The Pakistan Times* 1974).

Military and Pakistan Air Force participation in the 1973 festival provided spectacular displays that demonstrated national defence capabilities while creating thrilling entertainment. Helicopter landings on the beds of moving trucks, reconnaissance aircraft demonstrations, and precision flying exhibitions awed the civilian audiences (Sheikh 1974). This served a dual purpose: it was spectacular, high-octane entertainment, but it also subtly promoted military prestige and national security narratives, which helped legitimize the military's substantial budget and prominent role in national politics. The festival's processions, with cardboard floats mounted on auto-engines, presented visual narratives of national economic progress and industrial development, materializing abstract development statistics into tangible, celebratory forms that were accessible to mass audiences.

The *Awami Mela* also integrated high culture into its popular framework. Renowned artists like the calligrapher Sadequain and the painter Ustad Allah Bakhsh displayed their works at stadium exhibitions. This act democratized cultural access by placing high art in a popular, festive context, while simultaneously elevating the festival's prestige. Perhaps most significantly, cultural performances including *bhangra* and *dhamal* by dance troupes from all four of Pakistan's provinces, wearing their distinct traditional costumes, created a powerful, visual representation of national "unity-in-diversity." This symbolically integrated Pakistan's diverse and often fractious regional cultures into a unified national identity, all while maintaining a recognizable provincial distinctiveness that acknowledged the federation's plural character (Sheikh 1974).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Horse and Cattle Show (its *Awami Mela* name having been discarded by new, more conservative regimes) evolved further, transforming from a primarily agricultural exhibition into a comprehensive display of Pakistan's technological advancement and industrial development. Livestock development authorities used the festival to introduce vaccination programmes and veterinary services, demonstrating the government's commitment to scientific agriculture while providing practical services to farmers (*Jang* 1989). Industrial exhibitors showcased a wide array of new, domestically manufactured products: fiber glass materials, refrigeration equipment, new printing technologies, and consumer goods. This demonstrated Pakistan's growing manufacturing capabilities and import-substitution achievements, creating national pride amongst audiences while simultaneously promoting the consumerism and modern lifestyles that were becoming increasingly accessible to an expanding urban middle class.

Companies like the Olympia Fiber Glass Corporation, established in 1988,

exemplified this new trend. They utilized the *Awami Mela* as a platform for product launches and market expansion, exhibiting fibre glass bathtubs, swimming pools, furniture, and water tanks, with the company's founder, Mirza Khursheed, proudly stating that their products were "now competing the international market standard" (*Jang* 1990). Similarly, Canadian freezer manufacturers used the show to demonstrate their technological sophistication and international collaborations, positioning Pakistani industry within global technological networks (*Jang* 1990). The introduction of Pana Flex and Viva International's flex printing technologies was hailed in the press as a "first step in the world of progress," a technology that would, in fact, revolutionize visual marketing in Pakistan's urban landscapes during the 1990s (*Jang* 1990).

The festival's expansion during 1989, under Chief Minister Nawaz Sharif's provincial government, demonstrated the increased governmental investment and high political stakes now attached to the event. The Punjab government's decision to fully fund the 1989 festival from the provincial budget represented a substantial financial commitment, reflecting a clear calculation that the political benefits and nationalist symbolism justified the significant public expenditure. Tellingly, both President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto served as chief guests that year. Their presence, despite their intense and bitter political rivalry, demonstrated that the festival's significance as a tool of state legitimation now transcended partisan conflicts (*Jang* 1989). The introduction of special "tattoo shows" restricted to women and children also created gender-segregated entertainment spaces, a model of state-sponsored leisure that accommodated conservative social norms while still enabling female participation.

The government's decision to officially patronize Basant celebrations in 2000 represented a second, and far more complex, strategic cultural intervention. This move was explicitly designed to project Pakistan as a liberal, peaceful, and culturally vibrant nation. This image-crafting was desperately needed during a period when the international perception of Pakistan was overwhelmingly negative, dominated by the aftermath of its 1998 nuclear tests and its controversial support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Lahore High Court provided a timely judicial legitimation, remarking that proper, safe venues should be designated where Basant enthusiasts could celebrate, which the government seized upon as a mandate for state organization and control (*Jang* 2000).

A powerful coalition of state bodies—the Tourism Corporation, the Horticulture Authority, the Arts Council, and the district administration—collaborated to organize an official *Basant Mela*. This event was centred around high-profile heritage sites like the Lahore Fort and Ali Park, featuring officially sanctioned kite competitions, musical performances, and elaborate decorative lighting. The state-sponsored elite gathering, the crown jewel of the event, was hosted at the historic Haveli Dhian Singh. It was attended by high officials, film and television celebrities, and foreign visitors. The popular pop-rock group Junoon performed in the illuminated courtyards, while invitees consumed elaborate buffets featuring "Desi Delights," an explicit marketing of an upscale, cosmopolitan, and safe version of Pakistani culture to a global audience (Chaudhary 2001, 43-44).

This new official festival was strategically rebranded as *Jashn-e-Baharan* (Spring Festival). This was a deliberate linguistic and political choice, designed to emphasize a generic, secular seasonal celebration rather than the "Basant" name, which religious critics had successfully and damagingly branded as "Hindu" and un-Islamic (*Nawa-e-Waqt* 2000). The week-long celebration schedule cleverly integrated the kite industry exhibitions with the ongoing *Awami Mela* (Horse and Cattle Show), creating a comprehensive, state-run spring festival complex that dominated Lahore's cultural calendar. This strategy proved highly successful in the short term, attracting massive domestic and, crucially, limited international tourism, which generated substantial economic activity for the city's hospitality, transport, entertainment, and retail sectors.

The Kite Flying Association, now acting as a quasi-state partner, publicly defended the festival against its religious critics. They emphasized the festival's cultural, rather than religious, character, arguing it was a "regular feature of festivities of Lahore...on the change of the season, in which people from all age groups and walks of life participate" (Chaudhary 2001, 43). This secular, cultural framing was a direct attempt to counter the "Hindu-origin" narrative and reposition the celebration as an indigenous Punjabi tradition. The Association even floated the idea of having Basant declared a public holiday, seeking permanent institutional protection. However, this official patronage proved to be a double-edged sword. While governmental support enabled an unprecedented scale and publicity, this official status also subjected Basant to heightened scrutiny, regulatory oversight, and political controversies, ultimately making it a larger, more visible, and more political target for its determined opponents.

The powerful coalition of opponents ultimately proved irresistible. The mounting, and sensationally-reported, casualties from chemical kite strings, firearms, and festival-related accidents, combined with the relentless, organized mobilization of religious conservative parties and the persistent, costly complaints from infrastructure authorities, generated overwhelming political pressure. The Supreme Court's *suo moto* action in 2005 initiated a new phase of judicial intervention, shifting the debate decisively into the legal-constitutional terrain. In this new forum, rational arguments for public safety and the state's duty to protect life held clear precedence over vaguer claims of cultural heritage (Zafar 2021). The Punjab Assembly passed a prohibition ordinance in 2006, though initial enforcement remained inconsistent. Finally, in 2007, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) government, in a decisive political choice that prioritized its religious conservative constituency and the undeniable public safety crisis, imposed a comprehensive, city-wide prohibition on kite flying. This act fundamentally and, it seems, permanently, altered Lahore's spring cultural landscape (Shakoor 2016, 223-227).

The ban did not end the cultural conflict, but it did end the public celebration. Governor Salman Taseer, a prominent liberal, attempted a brief and symbolic revival in 2009 by opening the Governor House for mela celebrations. This move demonstrated the continuing political contestation over the festival's fate and the competing visions of Pakistani cultural identity (Shakoor 2016, 226-227). Taseer's assassination in 2011 by a religious extremist—over a different, though related, cultural-political conflict—

symbolized the lethal stakes involved in these culture wars. The PMLN government promptly restored the comprehensive prohibition in 2010. All subsequent efforts by civil society groups or governments to revive Basant, even in modified, "safe" zones with regulated strings, have repeatedly failed, collapsing under sustained political opposition, judicial concerns, and the effective mobilization of religious conservatives. The suppression of Lahore's most prominent, popular, and economically significant spring festival represents a profound cultural loss, a casualty of its own technologically-amplified dangers and the political ascendance of a powerful religious-conservative movement.

Conclusion

Spring festivals in Lahore, from the 1950s to 2010, were far more than simple celebrations; they were crucial sites for the production, expression, and collective experience of communal happiness. Traditional festivals like Basant and Mela Chiraghan were deeply embedded in the region's identity, connecting the agricultural rhythms of the harvest, the spiritual devotion of the Sufi shrine, and the social bonding of community in a way that generated joy on multiple, reinforcing levels. They offered the promise of economic prosperity from the harvest, aesthetic pleasure from the landscape, spiritual fulfillment from devotional practice, and social cohesion from collective participation in a shared tradition. The Pakistani state, in its various incarnations, recognized this immense power. State interventions, from the top-down creation of the Horse and Cattle Show to the later, opportunistic patronage of Basant, demonstrated a clear understanding of how the emotion of happiness could be effectively mobilized as a national resource—a powerful tool for nation-building, political legitimation, and international image-crafting.

The impact of modernization on this complex emotional landscape was, in the end, profoundly contradictory. It enabled spectacular technological innovations—night flying with searchlights, razor-sharp chemical strings, and mass media coverage—that expanded the festivals' scale, thrill, and commercial potential. Yet these same innovations, combined with rapid, unregulated urbanization and deep social change, generated lethal safety hazards, fueled intractable religious controversies, and exacerbated class divides. The ultimate prohibition of Basant in 2007 was a direct consequence of these unresolved contradictions. It stands as a powerful, tragic example of how modernization's unmanaged dangers, when skillfully harnessed by a motivated religious-conservative political movement, can lead to the complete destruction of a cultural practice, not its successful transformation. This imposed a substantial emotional and economic cost, silencing a primary, collective source of joy that had helped define the city's spirited identity for generations (Bashir 2019).

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