

THE RAVIAN RENAISSANCE

Kamal Uddin Azfar

The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 marked the end of the Eastern Roman Empire. Historians regard it as the beginning of the European Renaissance. The exodus of Greek scholars and artisans to Rome in the wake of the turning point brought with it the fertile silt of the accumulated wisdom and aesthetic achievement of Byzantium. Rome was connected to Greece, the source of Western civilization

Greece is not unfamiliar to the waters of the Ravi. Three encounters with the Greek civilization have taken place in the recorded history between the Greek civilization and the land of the five rivers. The Ravi is the central river and on its banks lies the ancient city of Lahore. As old as time itself or at least Constantinople.

Aristotle's famous pupil, Alexander the Great, rose from the West and marched towards the rising sun. He stooped on the banks of the *Hydaspes*, the Jehlum, where he encountered Raja Porus. He then sailed down the Indus and marched to Babylon where death, the grim reaper, awaited him.

This clash of arms gave birth to the Gandhara civilization; the statues in Marshall's Museum at Taxila preserves for posterity the blend of the classical grace of Greece with the exotic languour of the east, the hallmark of the Gandhara civilization. A little to the North of the museum lie the remains of the Greek temple, with Ionian columns crumbling in the dust. A nation, which ignores its history, does so at its own peril.

The second moment of contact between Greek and the East came with the diaspora of the mystics. The most famous of all is Data Sahib's Durbar. In his treatise on Sufism, "*Kashful Mahjoob*", Data Sahib inscribed the principles of the mystical dimension of Islam. The juxtaposition of Appearance and Reality, which is the core of his perennial philosophy is a Platonic conceptualization of Essence and Existence.

Another millennium was to pass before the third wave of Western civilization came with the liberation of the Punjab from Sikh rule in the middle of the 19th century. "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet"!! But they did meet on the banks of the Ravi at Lahore in the "Lodgia" of Government College, Lahore.

The proud tower of Government College, Lahore is the symbol of the Ravian Renaissance. Strange things happened with the siege of Delhi and the extinction of the Mughal Dynasty in 1857. The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, though disinterested in power and prestige was a man of letters, a patron of poets and artists. The Urdu language, like the Italian language, the offspring of the European

Renaissance, was born and bred in the penumbral twilight of Mughal Delhi, but it underwent resurgence. Altaf Hussain Hali moved to Lahore from Delhi, and so did the great critic Muhammad Hussein Azad, who also taught at Government College. No wonder, the two greatest Urdu poets of the 20th century — Iqbal in the first half of the century, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz in the second half of the century — were products of Government College, Lahore.

I had the good fortune to be present at the establishment of Government College as an autonomous degree-awarding institution last winter. All credit goes to Ravians from various walks of life for continuing the efforts to achieve this goal and above all to Dr. Khalid Aftab for his unremitting devotion to this task.

The brochure revealed that women were recipients of 11 out of the top 18 awards in academics and extra-curricular activities which means 62% of the top students are women as the Principal of the King Edward Medical College, founded in 1860 and, thus, older than GC was quick to calculate that 55% of students admitted on merit to his college are women. The place of women in a society is the key to economic, social and political development. The Human Development reports confirm a positive connection between female literacy, participation of women in the economic life of society and stable population growth-rate.

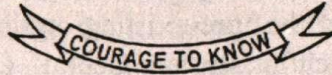
At the time of the separation of Bangladesh, its population exceeded that of Pakistan. Today, it is the other way round. At current rate of population explosion, we are heading for a Malthusian trap, civil commotion, environmental degradation and an army of educated unemployed youth in the vain search of jobs. The tide can only be turned by an enlightened and awakened youth, specially the women-folk of today. One generation of educated women could banish, forever, the curse of illiteracy.

Some historians hold that it is too early to pronounce judgment about the French Revolution. The same is true for the throes of progress Government College is in presently whose foundation-stone at Lahore was laid in 1864. It was the poet-philosopher Iqbal, a student of GC, who predicted in the Muslim League session of 1930, that the final destiny of the Muslims of North-West India was a separate homeland and not far from the college the Lahore Resolution was passed 10 years later in 1940.

As I saw the proud new generation of Ravians forgathered to receive their degrees on that fine Lahore morning in the Oval at the 1st convocation of Government College as a degree-awarding institution, my heart filled with pleasure. The prophets of doom and gloom have already helped aggravate the festering sores of nation but this confident new generation of men and women marching forward towards a better tomorrow is a ray of hope emanating from the bowels of our nation. During the darkest days of Zia's regime, Fiaz Ahmed Fiaz kept aloft the beacon of fortitude and courage. Faiz was to Ghalib, what Eliot was to Donne — a rediscovery of the eternal truths — each a metaphysical poet of his time. The college motto

“Courage to know” was borrowed from Kant’s synthesis of the Age of Enlightenment.

A new century has dawned. A heavy burden lies upon the teachers and students of this college to continue the struggle for a modern and enlightened Pakistan. We have a duty to fight the priests of obscurantism and the purveyors of hate. Let us choose the path of the struggle for the emancipation of the unlettered of the earth with a book of verse in our hands by Faiz Ahmed Faiz.



Never was our heritage of civilization and culture half so rich. We may do our little share to augment it and transmit it, confident that time will wear away chiefly the dross of it, and that what is finally fair and worthy in it will be preserved, to illuminate many generations.

(The Pleasures of Philosophy, Will Durant)