

Bakar Kahani

Babar Sheikh

In the area near Karachi Zoo which is colloquially known as 'Gandhi Garden', a few hundred meters from the shrine of Hazrat Pir Jumman Shah Bukhari, stands a sixty-year old shop. The *Garden ki Bakarkhani*, as it is popularly known, remains a confectionary haven and a palatable portal to a long-forgotten past. The air of the neighbourhood was once filled with erratic sounds of brass instruments being tuned, muffled by the bustling sounds of honking Karachi Transport Corporation (KTC) buses and pedestrians. The first floor of the complex opposite the shop was home to wedding bands and several of the shops were used as booking offices by Karachi's most popular brass bands. Before falling victim to the recent anti-encroachment drive, the rustic structure facing the shop displayed band members' laundered uniforms drying on makeshift washing lines. About three hundred meters from the shop was Café Nazlee, named after the famous actress who regularly performed cabaret there. The building where the shop is located is also in shambles – a fragile memory of simpler times. The shop is a family-owned business and serves as a retail outlet as well as a workstation where its celebrated product, *bakarkhani*, is prepared.

Bargess Buns, a friend and saxophone player, had taken me to the area almost two decades ago to find and purchase a tuba. In order to celebrate the acquisition of one dating back to 1914, Buns and myself stopped at the *Garden ki bakarkhani* shop to treat ourselves. As we approached the shop, he was full of praise for the unique taste of the *bakarkhani* and how one bite of it transports one back in time. It was with much anticipation that I waited for our order to be handed to us.

A little larger than the circumference of one's palm, the *bakarkhani* was almost round and layered, with a golden-brown top. Fresh from the oven and still slightly warm, the crisp layers crumbled in my mouth as I took the first bite of this celebrated local delicacy. There was honesty in its plainness, an age-old taste assured within those layers. My first experience formed a memory that kept returning to me for years. What was so special about this place, its people and the *bakarkhani*? Was it the abandoned poetry, remembrances and unspoken narratives? Was it just that particular day? Or the blank look I had seen in the eyes of a trumpet player in the area as he smoked his cigarette and stared endlessly at the road? I was not sure what had left a mark on me. Everything seemed connected in the simplicity and stillness, which stood in sharp contrast to my fast-paced life.



Tahir standing at the entrance of his shop.
Image courtesy: Khalid Moeed.

For approximately two decades I returned to the store as an occasional customer, and my interactions with the store owner were limited to a cursory *salam*. When I finally did speak to the owner, Muhammad Tahir Sahib, I introduced myself as a student of the arts and he unlocked the small metal gate of his shop to let me in. A septuagenarian of medium height and build, Tahir Sahib had an air of quiet self-assurance about him. He was puzzled by my interest in a six-decade old *bakarkhani* shop, but his hesitation gradually disappeared. There was so much I wanted to ask him: how did a small family business like *Garden ki Bakarkhani* survive all these years? Which social and economic factors influenced and shaped the business? With no signage, advertising or expansion, how do they service such a massive clientele? How did the craft and business outlive trends of mass-produced, machine-made food? What does survival in Karachi mean? What are the risks of earning a livelihood through a hereditary craft, and most importantly, what is his life like?

Stepping into the shop was like being teleported to the past that had survived, tucked away on the corner of the road. It made me wonder how thousands of such extraordinary stories exist in old parts of the city - layers of urban memories centred in belonging and belief much like the *bakarkhani*, seemingly simple yet composed of several complex layers.

The evolution of Tahir Sahib's recipe and the process of making the *bakarkhani* is deeply rooted within the 1947 Partition of India and the accompanying mass migration. Abandoned and separated children who survived were provided refuge at an orphanage run by a social welfare organization in Lahore. Tahir Sahib explained;

"My father, who was still young at the time, was given refuge at an orphanage near the Attari border. Periodically, lists of orphans would be announced to the public and families willing to adopt would come forward. Film star Ejaz's paternal uncle Haji Jani had no children, so he adopted my father. He was a resident of Mochi Gate, Androon Sheher Lahore, and used to run a successful business selling naan, *kulcha* and *bakarkhani*. At the time it was common to involve young children in family businesses and Haji Jani did what he thought was best for the sustenance of my young father."

Muhammad Tahir's journey and his craft

Tahir Sahib's family had initially moved from Amritsar, India, to Lahore, but after sensing a lack of harmony with the lifestyle of Punjab, his parents opted to move to Karachi. They set up their household in the Pakistan Quarters in the Gandhi Garden area of Karachi where his parents faced many struggles. Together, his parents sought to ease their financial challenges by making *bakarkhani* out of a modest clay oven from the veranda of their home. Over a short

period of time, word spread and his entrepreneurial parents set up a tin shutter to formalise the separation between their home and the space they had dedicated on the property for the shop. *Bakarkhani* was a popular food item in areas of Punjab and Kashmir, and a number of shops in post-Partition Lahore served it. In the beginning, people who came to buy *bakarkhani* from Tahir Sahib were those who were familiar with its taste and specific style. They included migrants from Punjab, its adjoining Hindko speaking areas and Kashmir, as well as immigrants from Amritsar, who yearned for traditionally prepared cuisine from the region. The fast-developing palette of Karachi, with an appetite for multiple flavours brought by its migrant communities, quickly included the *bakarkhani* as a staple everyday item for consumption. Tahir Sahib recounted those early days of the business:

"As time went by, things started to move in a positive direction, everything started falling into place. All of us, as a family, contributed to the craft and the business, especially my mother who had a very important part to play. By this time, I was five years old [and] my hand couldn't reach the counter where all the work took place, [so] my father constructed a wooden stand that I could climb on and help with the process of rolling the dough using the rolling pin. When I was growing up and trends were changing fast, my father once asked me if I wanted to continue this lineage, working with the craft of baking? I was honest and told my father, I find this very tedious and hard work. First of all, the proximity to the tandoor and a constant exposure to high temperatures and then the required level of attention. He asked me what I wanted to do. My stepbrother worked in Meetha Dar, Sarafa Bazaar as a jeweller. I told him I wanted to work with him. Soon after I started working part-time with him learning the craft of jewellery making. I could not abandon the shop at home so I still helped my father in the mornings.

In 1993, my father fell victim to a tragic road accident, when an out-of-control 5C bus hit him. He suffered major injuries and, after forty days of being treated at a local hospital, he passed away. After his death, I was once again at the crossroads reviewing my career choices: should I continue working as a jeweller and close the *bakarkhani* shop or should I return to my hereditary work and craft? I don't know if my decision was rational or emotional, but I realized that this generational work of baking was something that I could depend on more than the newly learnt craft of jewellery making. In retrospect I think it was a good decision. That was a period I dug deep into the years and years of learning, tried to completely focus and dedicate all I could to the craft and the process of making *bakarkhani*. What you inherit is unique to you, *virasat* (heritage) has a different colour than anything else. I valued and treasured my knowledge of the craft that was handed down by my father, and with the same sense of responsibility, I passed it to my son and to a few trusted *karigars*¹ who had



The process of making. Image courtesy: Chandan Pirzada.

spent years working at the shop. It is nothing short of a challenge to awaken this level of interest since a majority of the *karigars* are not concerned with details such as the crispiness of the layers and the drying out process that affects the quality and freshness. Their focus is production and quantity that in turn delivers them their daily wage. Since we focused on the details of the making process, I realized it took us, my son and myself, much longer to do the same work that our *karigars* did in a much shorter time period. The *karigars'* objective was different from ours."

The process of making

Muhammad Tahir continued with his narrative as he spoke about the origin of his version of *bakarkhani* and what makes it different from others:

"From my understanding and knowledge, over the past few centuries, our version of the *bakarkhani* was popularized by the Kashmiri people. Families of Kashmiri descent were responsible for bringing it to various parts of the subcontinent, but the shape changed from region to region. Once it came to Lahore, it looked different than what it did in Kashmir; similarly when we developed it in Karachi we reformed the texture. In Lahore, they are used to making it a little solid with less layers, whereas we chose to replace the solidity with more layers, which drastically changes the texture. In comparison the *bakarkhani* you find in Rawalpindi is much heavier, the taste is pretty much the same but it feels like each piece weighs a quarter of a kilogram. The *bakarkhani* we produce doesn't even weigh twenty-five grams. This innovation came as a result of constant experimentation for years, which can be credited to my father. And through time we were able to minimize the water content to a great extent. This drying out is also the reason that you are able to store our *bakarkhani* for extended periods of time. Even after a year of storage the taste does not change, there is no stale smell. However, the shape might deform a little and if it is baked or microwaved for a couple of minutes, it becomes as fresh as when you first bought it.

I grew up watching my father unceasingly trying to develop this form, the layers kept getting thinner and thinner to a point when the ultimate baked texture was realized: a cross-section of very fine crisp layers held together by coatings of margarine. When the rolled out dough is placed in the tandoor for baking, it sticks against the vertical tandoor wall. This position helps the margarine to melt through the layers and integrate evenly. There is so much heat coming through the contact between the flour and clay that the *bakarkhani* is almost fried by the temperature.



Fresh Bakarkhani from the Tandoor. Image courtesy: Chandan Pirzada.

The excess water is sucked into the clay walls and the rest becomes steam and evaporates. It's the basic law of science, anything standing up vertically will have the gravitational pull in one direction. This is the reason why the *bakarkhani* prepared in modern day bakeries taste so different, they are placed horizontally and not vertically, in metal trays, when baked. Back in the day when my father started the shop it was not margarine but animal fat that we used as a prime ingredient."

In addition to the production of *bakarkhani* and *nankhatai*, Tahir Sahib also experimented with *manda*, a paper-thin sheet of flour used for samosa and Chinese spring rolls. *Manda's* popularity by the mid-80s led Tahir Sahib to create and sell his own style that is a comparatively thinner and drier alternative. Within the city centre, shops selling fried items began to procure *manda* from them, especially vendors from the Memon community. From the 10th of Sha'ban each year, the business focuses primarily on the production of *manda* for the next two months. However, large quantities of *bakarkhani* are made and packed into cartons to cater to the influx of customers during Ramzan. The supplementary creation of *manda* has thus proved crucial to the shop's survival.

Persistence (*Tasalsul*)

For fifty-five years, Tahir Sahib has worked at the shop which has survived amidst an ever changing urban landscape. Tahir Sahib and one of his sons stay close to the craft to this day as they work alongside employees, kneading, mixing and baking without any hierarchical differentiation between them. Mechanisation and its ability to increase production and revenue had inevitably impacted traditional manual crafts, including the production of *bakarkhani*. Tahir Sahib tried his luck with a mechanized dough-maker, as well as electric and gas ovens, but soon realized the negative impact on the taste of the product and quickly reverted to kneading by hand and the use of traditional clay *tandoors*. "Something went missing each time we tried to innovate the process through technology," he says. The modern industrial baking oven is made of metal in order to heat and cool down rapidly, while clay *tandoors* gradually heat up and then retain their temperature which adds crispness to the layers of *bakarkhani*. "When the dough comes in contact with the hot clay tandoor, most of the oil is drawn out of it during the process of baking", explains Tahir Sahib. The family's dedication to their longstanding traditional method as well as maintaining the quality of their craft, where others have compromised in the interest of expansion and revenue, evokes an uneasy ambivalence between the manufactured and the handmade as well as between modernity and tradition.



Tahir at his shop in the evening. Image courtesy: Khalid Moeed

Tahir Sahib reflects on his father's persistence and resilience:

"My father, with his tragic childhood and two migrations, saw very hard times. It was God-given perseverance that helped him survive. Take any business that has numerous branches spread out over a region. One would think it's very tough to manage so many businesses at the same time, but the truth is that the real hardship comes one's way in establishing that first business. The drudgery, focus, dedication and honesty required in that process is unparalleled. To develop and introduce a product to a group of people is the most difficult task; societies are made up of multiple communities, you never know what you are getting into. Patience and persistence are two factors that play a major role in developing a clientele. It's been nearly six decades and we still have to answer questions like, what is this you are selling? What kind of *paprhi* is this? Is this a crispy *kulcha*? What is a *bakarkhani*? Clients come and go, people's tastes continuously change and evolve, customers move on, they too need a change. In turn we get new ones, it's a natural cycle, a process where God creates this *tasalsul*. When one puts in time, effort and dedication, it results in the formation of *tasalsul*. New businesses, especially in the eatery industry, crop up every day. Lakhs of rupees are invested into fancy shop fronts and impressive outlets that unfortunately only last for a few months. There are countless examples of this across the metropolis. It's my point of view and belief that if you focus on something completely and struggle in making it happen then God grants you success. A lot of it depends on your *niyyat* (intention) and if you have managed to make a connection between your hard work, the craft, and your expectation of a result, this *lau lagana*² eventually brings you its rewards."

Tahir Sahib's resolute belief in his hereditary practice is informed by his experiences, hardships, and successful experimentations. He links his comments on mechanisation to overpopulation and rapid urbanisation and believes that these factors are linked to the diminishing *thehrao* which is being replaced with *nafsa nafsi*³. There is a change in his tone when he speaks about the past, signalling an emotional protest against the need to revert to a relatively easier life with more manageable expectations. "Quick popularity never stands the test of time", Tahir Sahib declares. He uses the words *mutawatir mehnat* (continuous effort) to describe his lifelong work and his dedication to his traditional craft.

The process of constantly making and unmaking of a city produces a loss that is especially disorientating for traditional craftsmen, as it leaves no place for permanence and stability. The story of the *Garden ki Bakarkhani* shop and those who stood against the tide to preserve and refine its craft draw one inexplicably to the notion of *thehrao*, an intrinsic and invaluable part of craft-making.

Notes

1. The use of the word *karigar* is interesting as it does not mean any ordinary worker but one with some craft skills.
2. In this case, the expression signifies devotion towards one's craft.
3. 'Thehrao' denotes slowing down, stability and contentment. 'Nafsa nafsi' is a term that means selfishness or self-indulgence and is often associated with the idea of a rat race.

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