Anna Suvorova

Lahore
Topophilia of Space and Place

Translated from Russian by the Author

Foreword by
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FOREWORD

Lahore is a city that creates loyalties. This thousand-year-old urban centre, in Pakistan’s Punjab, has been an important political capital off and on for much of its history. At the same time, it has been a frequent target of invasion and conquest, typically by Central Asian nomadic empires but also by the Sikhs and the British. Despite its turbulent career, Lahore has somehow managed to be a cultural centre with a distinctive resonance and charm. I, myself, admit to having fallen under its spell long ago. Of course, scholars are supposed to claim objectivity so that they can occupy a position of lofty impartiality. In theory, such abstraction and distance is necessary to avoid charges of partisanship. Nevertheless, like many other visitors to the city, I have found that Lahore has an extraordinary charm that few other places can claim. That attraction is definitely worth exploring.

The book that you are holding is a remarkable investigation of attachment to place and space, which Anna Suvorova has addressed as totophilia. She has undertaken a thorough examination of the subject, with a topical organization that allows us to peruse the city of Lahore in a leisurely fashion, much like the Parisian flâneurs or urban wanderers that she extols as a model. Her study is richly informed with textual and architectural detail but without the oppressive detail of specialist history. While she makes a number of explicit comparisons between Lahore and other major cities, including the Muslim holy city of Mecca, the title of the second chapter (‘Lahore is Lahore’) makes a glancing allusion to a popular narrative about Lahore that needs to be shared here. As the story goes, an inhabitant of Lahore went to Mecca on pilgrimage, and accomplished the usual rituals with great satisfaction and delight. On completing the pilgrimage, he addressed the Almighty in prayer, saying, ‘God! Your city is indeed wonderful and I am very happy to have visited but, in the end, Lahore is Lahore.’ This frank and perhaps self-satisfied comment, ostensibly delivered by an unsophisticated Punjabi, states an honest truth: Lahore is the real centre of the cultural universe for its devotees. And, who are we to argue with this sentiment?
The author, Anna Suvorova, has special qualifications to undertake this study. A Russian scholar who has specialized in the study of Urdu literature, Suvorova has written about Urdu poetry (especially *masnavi*) and Sufi shrines in South Asia. She has also contributed an earlier monograph on another important Indo-Muslim city, Lucknow. This affectionate study of Lahore was originally written in Russian, and is now presented in a lucid English translation for a wider readership.

While reading through this book, I found myself returning, in spirit, to this city where I lived for a year in 1986, returning occasionally for memorable visits in later years. My family and I have experienced a remarkable culture there, spending precious time, on a daily basis, with artists, musicians, poets, diplomats, politicians, and scholars. Our landmarks were the great Sufi shrines, Mughal forts and mosques, and the old walled city and environs of Anarkali; from there, one passed from Punjab University to Lawrence Gardens (now Bagh-e Jinnah) via the Mall, and then headed out to the suburbs of Gulberg and Lahore Cantonment. We were fortunate to have an amazing friend in Maharaj Ghulam Husain (d. 2001), the great master of kathak dance, who introduced us to the full range of cultural possibilities in the city. Looked at from that perspective and memory, it has been a moving experience to read through this superb synthesis, which has brought together so many remarkable perspectives on the city of Lahore.

Suvorova rightly begins with a theoretical overview of the nature of personal attachment to place and space. Topophilia is an apt term for this deeply human sentiment, and the insights of Yi-Fu Tuan and Gaston Bachelard are indeed helpful for zooming in on the specific character of this phenomenon. The author then takes us through a multi-levelled exploration of the architecture and urban space of Lahore, which she convincingly describes as a palimpsest—a document that has been overwritten repeatedly, without erasing the comments of earlier writers. The authors she investigates include Indo-Persian poets, Mughal chroniclers, European travellers (from Elizabethan England to Czarist Russia), British colonial officials, as well as modern Urdu short story writers. The gardens and monuments of Lahore come to life for us through the words of the poet Amir Khusraw, the Emperor Jahangir, and Rudyard Kipling, all of whom had intimate links to the city. The author is not fearful of lingering over fascinating questions, such as the
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massive Bollywood film portrayals of the doomed romance of Anarkali and Prince Salim. She even takes the reader on a tour of the European fantasies of Lahore, in orientalist literature and opera. She vividly evokes the springtime rituals of basant, with its competitive kite-flying contests. She brings the reader up-to-date with dinner at Cuckoo’s Den, the restaurant/art gallery in the red light district that is now an obligatory stop for those who wish to savour a magnificent view of the city along with the fabulous cuisine of Lahore. For anyone who has spent time in the city, this richly documented essay furnishes a valuable and insightful overview of the many reasons why Lahore has many devotees.

It is all the more sobering, then, to recall recent events and see effects of the devastating acts of violence that have been inflicted upon Lahore, as they have much of the rest of Pakistan. Political opponents, foreign athletes, religious minorities, and even the great Sufi shrines have been the targets of these attacks. While the solution to such a crisis must lie outside the scope of a book like this, nevertheless, Anna Suvorova deserves our gratitude for pointing out the way in which Lahore has repeatedly survived invasion and catastrophe. What makes the topophilia of Lahore so distinctive? She persuasively argues that it is the Punjabi ethnic and cultural substratum that provides the solid character underlying the city of Lahore. I think there is truth in this observation, and I believe that Lahore will draw upon its immense cultural resources to face and overcome its current challenges—which is why one can affirm the distinctive love the city generates and that is inherent in the statement, ‘Lahore is Lahore’.

CARL W. ERNST