

column: Parisien Portrait

The Yesteryears

by Raana Haider

THE Parisii, a Celtic tribe of hunters, farmers and boatmen settled on the island, Ile de la Cite some 300 BC. Today's Paris derives its name from its first inhabitants, the Parisii. The first Parisien settlement was routed by the Romans who arrived in 50 BC and named their settlement Lutetia. "The gravel beach of that island was its first city wall, the Seine its first moat" wrote Victor Hugo in 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'. The Romans expanded the increasingly urban habitation onto first the Rive Gauche (left bank) of the Seine River and then as the town continued to prosper, the population spilled over to the Rive Droite (right bank).

By the Middle Ages, the city of Paris was more or less settled along the following basis — the Ile de la Cite remained the heart and soul of the city and site of the Notre Dame de Paris, the Gothic masterpiece cathedral started in the middle of the twelfth century by Bishop Maurice de Sully and continued to be built over some six hundred years; the Rive Gauche — the intellectual area, Quartier Latin (the Latin Quarter) which in time became the site of the Sorbonne University founded in 1231 by Robert de Sorbon and the Rive Droite where commerce was located and Les Halles was established in the middle of the thirteenth century as the wholesale market for all of Paris. Les Halles was to be the supplier of food for Paris for some eight hundred years till it was dismantled and moved to Rungis on the outskirts of Paris near Orly airport. Les Halles used also to be the place to indulge in piping-hot onion soup with melted cheese. Today, the avant-garde complex of Forum des Halles, a vast network of shops, cinema halls, theatres, cafes, restaurants, art galleries and a swimming pool stands in its place. Today's Louvre Museum was also built as a fort to defend the right flank of the Ile de la Cite in the thirteenth century on the Rive Droite.

By the fifteenth century, Paris as Victor Hugo wrote, "was divided into three completely distinct and separate cities, each with its own shape, uniqueness, customs, traditions, privileges and history the Cite, the Universite and the Ville. Each of these three parts was a city, but a city too special to be complete and to be able to do without the other two. They therefore presented three individual faces. The Cite was city of churches, the Ville of palaces, the Universite of colleges as if to say the island was the province of the bishop, the right bank of the merchants and the left bank of the rector." Thus, Paris had its Heart and Soul in the centre on the Ile de la Cite, its Mind on the Rive Gauche and its Body on the Rive Droite. In essence, the Paris of today remains the same.

A little known museum, the Archaeological Crypt of Notre Dame de Paris in the Parvis de Notre Dame (Square of Notre Dame) is enlightening Michel Fleury, now vice-president of the commission of old Paris and author of 'Naissance de Paris' (Birth of Paris)

published in 1997, documents the origins of the capital from a neolithic village to a city in the Middle Ages. While excavating the Parvis de Notre Dame site from 1965-1970, Michel Fleury came across foundations of earlier constructions. Detailed maps show the evolution of the site through the ages. Remains are to be seen of what used to be a main street, Rue Neuve (New Street) — seven metres wide a considered wide in its time — for transportation of blocks of stone from the nearby hills of Paris for the construction of the cathedral, Notre Dame de Paris. Also to be seen are the piles of bricks used in a form of heating (hypocaust) where floors and chutes were used to heat walls some seventeen hundred years ago (1-3 AD).

In 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame,' Victor Hugo wrote, "very wall, every stone of this venerable monument is a page not only from the history of France, but also of science and art. Among all the old churches of Paris, this central mother-church is a kind of chimera: it has the head of this, the limbs of that, and the torso of another, something from everything. Each flux of time has brought its own alluvial deposit, every race has made its own contribution to the monument, each individual has added a stone."

The first bridge of Paris and still today its shortest bridge, the Petit Pont (Small Bridge) linked the Ile de la Cite with the Rive Gauche. The bridge had houses on both sides of the bridge till a fire devoured a number of lives and a law went into effect in the Middle Ages which put and end to houses being built on bridges.

While the church took care of people's soul, it also took responsibility for people's body. And so the first Hotel de Dieu (Hotel of God) i.e. hospitals were established in Paris, in the present square of the Notre Dame de Paris. The early medical centres were run by religious orders, largely nuns. The tradition of human ailments being cared for by nuns continues today in the form of the well-known Catholic order of Sisters of Charity of which the late Mother Theresa was the most famous. The early hospital was in time destroyed. In the 1860s, the present Hotel de Dieu, the oldest and still-running hospital was constructed in the Italian Renaissance architectural style. Its stands to one's left as one faces the Notre Dame de Paris.

In the 1600s, the cultural phenomenon of the Italian Renaissance reached the banks of the Seine and the city of Paris which till then was a homogeneous city of an architectural and historical product of the medieval period was irrevocably altered. "That severe unity was blended with the dazzling luxury of the new style, and softened by the introduction of rounded Romanesque arches and Greek columns," notes 'Places and History: Paris' (1997).

Catherine Medecis planned the Jardin de Tuileries, the extended gardens in front of the Louvre Museum which reach the spectacular Place de la

Concorde. The first stone bridge across the Seine was built, the Pont Neuf (New Bridge). Earlier bridges had been constructed of wood. The oldest existing bridge of Paris is still called the Pont Neuf. Francis I and Henri IV expanded the Louvre from a fortress into a palace and made it fit for a king and the city of Paris came to represent the ideal city of an urban civilisation in the seventeenth century.

Louis XIV, the Sun King (1643-1715) was a grandiose and monumental builder, constructing the Versailles Palace on the outskirts of Paris where he transferred his court from the Louvre Palace. Wide boulevards and expansive gardens were set up Louis XIV is the source of the famous statement, "I am the State." The self-centredness of the monarchy came to an end in 1789 with the tearing down of the notorious Bastille prison and the guillotine of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in the Place de la Concorde in 1793. The French Revolution gave birth to the credo, "Liberte, Egalite et Fraternite" which became gospel words for the liberation of humanity all over the world. As Goethe said, "From this place and from this day, begins a new era in the history of the world."

Place de la Concorde is described in the Michelin Guide to France, as "a perfect expression of the Louis XV style ... The square owes its monumental character to the colonnaded buildings defining it to the north, its octagonal plan, and to the massive pedestals intended for allegorical statues of French cities. The pink granite Luxor Obelisk, 3,300 years old, covered with hieroglyphics, was brought here from Egypt in 1836." Noting the uniqueness of La place de la Concorde, "Paris" states that, "There are perhaps few squares in the world with the magic atmosphere of enchantment present at every hour of the day in this square. Indeed at night, under the light of the street-lamps, its atmosphere becomes unreal, almost fable-like." It is all that and more. Ask anyone.

Notre Dame de Paris cathedral was the venue for the self-coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor and Josephine as Empress in 1804. A massive painting in the Louvre by Jacques-Louis David depicts brilliantly the scene. Napoleon vowed to make Paris the most beautiful city in the world — a task he set about with a vengeance. Had he not said, "If Paris is to be beautified there is more to demolish than to construct. Why not knock down the whole quarter of the Cite, that vast ruin fit to house only rats?"

Napoleon is credited with some of the most imposing monuments Paris bestows on us today. He completed the construction of the Greco-architectural church at Madeline. Four bridges across the Seine were constructed. Work began in the colossal Arc De Triomphe to commemorate his victory at the battle of Austerlitz. The Arc de Caroussel was commissioned to honour the Grande Armee of France. The wholesale food market at Les Halles was reorganised. The elegantly arcaded Rue de Rivoli designed by Napoleon's official architects,

Percier and Fontaine was opened. On the Rue de Rivoli I remember from the 1950s, the bookshop, WH Smiths and Sulka, the exclusive menswear shop which my father then frequented.

Napoleon Bonaparte embellished the Invalides where he housed veteran soldiers and where his mortal remains were finally interred in 1840, although he had died on the island, St Helena in 1821. "The recently into France was the last triumphal voyage of the Frenchman best loved by his people, most venerated by his soldiers and most feared by his enemies. In September 1840, a French ship carried the body of Napoleon to Le Havre, then slowly up the Seine as far as Paris. On 15 September, in a snow storm, almost the entire city attended the funeral of the emperor, whose body moved in a slow procession along the great boulevards, passing under the Arch of Triumph and descending the Champs-Elysees to come to rest here in the Dome des Invalides and thus end at last Napoleon's long exile," notes 'Paris'.

The birth of modern architecture occurred between the years 1848 to 1914, according to 'Architecture in the 19th Century', a Beaux Arts special issue magazine (1992). Charles Baudelaire observed this transformation; "for him, the chimney stacks were modern masts that competed in the city sky with the old church steeples." He lamented "that the old Paris is no more". It was also a manifestation of an urban transformation of towns and cities into larger metropolitan areas. Medieval Paris was being transformed into modern Paris. A skyline that once had been pierced only by church steeples and spires, was in the latter half of the nineteenth century increasingly accompanied by evidence of the changing urban landscape. Paris expanded rapidly; from 1851 to 1900, 1,240 houses and 3,588 in the adjacent suburbs were constructed states the Beaux Arts issue.

In a substantive work on the Paris of yesterday and today, 'Paris, deux mille ans d'histoire' ('Paris, two thousand years of history') (1997), Jean Favier, a renowned French medieval scholar and former head of the National Archives states that Paris already had some 240,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth century a mega-population — for its time and was the largest western city in the Middle Ages. At the time of the Revolution in 1789, Paris had surpassed 600,000 people and by 1914 had a population of more than a quarter of a million. As a function of the expanding Parisien population, the administrative units, arrondissements also grew. While there had been twelve arrondissements in 1795, it grew to twenty by 1860.

Eighteenth century industrialisation created a new urban-based business, skilled and professional class — a social class that was neither hereditary nor land-based. The French Revolution of 1789 had given the new bourgeoisie class further rights. They contributed to the transformation of the Paris city centre by "wanting access to privileges that had formerly been denied to them: the

luxury of public and private space and cultural activities (theatres, museums and libraries). The nineteenth century bourgeois monuments — banks, train stations, department stores — were to find their legitimate place within the city." (Architecture in the 19th Century). Similarly, in the private domain, luxurious new hotel particuliers (town mansions) were built. A superb and sumptuous sample of such an abode is the Jacquemart-Andre home on Boulevard Haussmann, Paris, now museum which also houses a private art collection, worthy of any world-famous museum. (See 'Three Little-known Gems').

There was also a growing realisation that since big and bigger cities were here to stay, then art and beauty had a great role to play. "The city is a work of art that exerts an influence on the mass of people every day, every hour," wrote the Viennese architect and art historian, Camillo Sitte, in 'The Art of Building Cities'. He criticized the systematic nature of the urban transformations of his time, which were dictated by a technical concept rather than by an artistic design. Taking Paris as an example, Sitte conceded the grandeur and ambition of the city's design, emphasizing its links with the Baroque tradition of 'showcasing' and 'positioning' the monuments. Of all the recent urban expansion and standardisation projects, the Paris solution deviates the least from the great Baroque issues ... We can therefore take the most spectacular cityscapes created in Paris as examples of artistic creations compatible with the practical requirements of our times."

It was in such a climate that Louis Napoleon Bonaparte became Napoleon III in 1852 For the radical urban transformation of Paris which he wished to achieve, he appointed Baron Georges Haussmann as Prefect of the Seine in 1853. In receiving a decree from Napoleon III, Haussmann annexed the suburban communes to Paris, ruthlessly levelled and rebuilt whole areas; leaving Paris a massive construction site for some forty years (the period of a generation in the late nineteenth century). "Within a few years, he imposed upon medieval, Baroque, romantic Paris a new modern, imperial vision of the capital," (Places and History: Paris).

Haussmann's vision was to encompass "the total architectural economy of the great city, considering the entire city to be a single monument in which all individual elements were linked," said Cesar Daly. Haussmann envisioned a monumental and rational plan for Paris, which would be constructed around a series of large axes, squares, boulevards and avenues. Jacques Ignace Hittorff (an eminent architect of the day) eliminated the irregularities of the Place de l'Etoile by constructing identical hotel Particuliers (town mansions) at the end of each avenue intersecting the large square. (Observe this aesthetic symmetrical feature the next time you are at l'Etoile). A network of streets was created to facilitate the movements between the arrondissements, and the traffic circles were admired by all and copied elsewhere in France and abroad. They became a model and a reference;

there was a small island in the center to protect pedestrians." (Architecture in the 19th Century), "on which stood the graceful shape of a superb street lamp, similar to a beacon in the middle of a fleet of wild cars ... The most original and grandiose invention in modern urban design," remarked the Venetian architect, Sitte.

Napoleon III's initial idea was for train stations to form the new gates to the 'new' capital. Implementation of this concept required a vast network of roads and support infrastructure. "Some 50 roads were created (for a total of 90 kilometers during the Second Empire) which formed new peripheral boulevards ... three new parks (including Parc Monceau) ... nineteen squares ... as well as aqueducts and a sewer system. The first railway station Gare St Lazare in the Quarter de l'Europe built in 1868 was the face of the modern Paris — a city both booming and blooming.

The neighbourhood attracted a generation of painters, the Impressionists, particularly, Manet, Monet and Morisot who lived in the area in the 1870s. More than one hundred years later in 1997, an exhibition of thirteen paintings by Manet, ten by Monet and works by other artists are on display at the Musee d'Orsay in a tribute to 'Manet, Monet, La Gare St Lazare'. The painters of the day captured the innovation of the new technology, the dynamism of the mood of the epoch and the ambience of the neighbourhood. As Alan Riding in an article, 'Paintings that Unlock a Paris Neighbourhood' in the International Herald Tribune writes, "Indeed, with little effort, it is still possible to gaze at the oils and smell the smoke, hear the roar and feel the shudder as steam engines shunted in and out along the platforms of the Gare St Lazare." It seems particularly appropriate that paintings of that period, commemorating the hustle and bustle of a new era, now be shown in what is an architectural masterpiece in iron and glass of the late nineteenth century — a railway station, the Gare d'Orsay which was transformed in the late twentieth century into the stunning Musee d'Orsay. Once again, plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose? Ah, oui.

Haussmann created a new urban landscape, even within the old city, through devices that included quasi-standardized facades, rows of trees lining the major streets and urban furniture (lampposts, benches and fountains). Paris is the best example of this desire to recreate a city within a city. (Architecture in the 19th Century) Haussmann gave Paris the intrinsic features of symmetrical simplicity and elegance which today seems so quintessentially Parisien.

"The city of Paris, the 'City of Lights', so beloved by all; was in fact, designed in place in the nineteenth century. What we, today, so admire and marvel, is the abundance of the past in the present. And as Victor Hugo said, "Human intelligence is there to be traced only in its aggregate. Time is the architect — the nation is the builder."

reflections

Inconveniences of Citizens on the Lesser Side

by Syed Maqsood Jamil

I was visiting Calcutta. It occurred to me that I should meet one of my school friends, long settled there. In school days he was a 'Shil' — from a caste of barbers. A common friend alerted me against embarrassment. That he was no longer a 'Shil' and has long become a 'Ray'. Thus, he has extricated himself from the inconveniences of belonging to the low caste of barbers. Fortunately, over the last 30 years, he has risen to a comfortably good position.

My purpose is not to cross sword with the Hindu caste system. These are the facts of life the world over. The inconveniences of having an identity different from the broader representative picture of the society. Of being a Hindu in an overwhelmingly Muslim society, of being a non-Bengali in Bengali society, of being black in a white society and the opposites too. They deal with faith, caste, language, colour, money, power and many such factors that create differences among human beings. One has no say in one's birth. It is for providence to decide. As for money and power, they are, in many societies and countries, grazing grounds for those who belong to the uniformity of the broader picture.

The essence of beauty is in diversity. Otherwise, everything in this world would have the uninspiring look of black and white. Besides, the element of sequence is very important to the human order. Balance, which is integral to the existence of the cosmic order, and human civilization, in a way harmoniously rests and functions on this sequence. For example white gives, that is why black absorbs, while violet, in gradual sequences becomes red. The human races, be it Europiform, Negroid or Mongoloid, commingles. Thus human civilisation is made of many races bound together in a single thread. The natural process is so effortless. So fundamental to mankind. Being different should not mean separateness. Nor should it become a factor for segregation of any kind, psychological, mental, social etc. I mean, it should not leave some people out to the fringe.

Yet we are caught in it. Whether we live in Bangladesh or Bosnia, India or Pakistan, Indonesia or China, America or Ireland. It is better to start from the home. I know of contrasting experiences which puts a sense of unease in me. A noted Bangla poet friend of mine who happens to carry a Hindu name once described me an insulting incident

which his family had to bear with much pain when they were living in an overwhelmingly Muslim staff quarter. One summer noon, when his wife wanted to be alone in her room, some of her neighbouring women around, wanted to spend their time in her place in leisurely chat. When the poet's wife declined courteously, it was not taken in a sensible spirit. The anger found an easy target in her being a citizen on the lesser side. I do not take it as a stray incident, because I have even found enlightened people indulging in such incencies whenever they become handy.

When it comes to linguistic differences, the inconvenience do not become lighter. Even today, the Urdu speaking non-Bengali, and that section of Dhakaites who speak a highly Bengaliized dialect of Urdu, shy away from speaking in Urdu in public places. It is not found to be convenient. They are looked on as different. The inconveniences are not easy to live with.

I remember one tragic occurrence of 1974, that I came across in a shoe store. An Urdu speaking lady was trying to purchase a shoe, for he little son, by communicating hard with the shopkeeper in a heavily Urdu accented Bangla. Her son in his exuberance

pointed a particular shoe. He could not conceal his exuberance, he wanted to speak to her mom in Urdu. I observed a look of horror on the lady's face. She instantly placed her hand hard on the mouth of the boy. It rocked me inside. Language commits no crime. Nor does faith, nor does colour or caste. It is people who do it. They can have all sorts of faith, colour, caste and language.

It took a Catholic John F. Kennedy, over 150 years to become the President of USA. The African American suffered great pain and humiliation and the loss of Martin Luther King to find a foothold in American society. There is no sufficient ground to think that African Americans no longer suffer the inconvenience of citizens on the lesser side. Otherwise, Rodney King could not have been barbarised.

The Bosnian Muslims are the sons of the soil. They speak the local Serbo-Croat language, has the same ethnic history. Yet, they are disdainfully called "The Turks". Many of them have been eating park, drinking liquor and, were rightly the most de-Islamized Muslims of the world. It could not protect them from the murderous hatred of the Serbs. Their idea of Serbia did not have any place for Bosnian Muslims.

Let us look at the way Pakistan is terrorizing its microscopic Christian minority. Her archrival India is now riding the crest of "Hindutva" after the demolition of Babri Mosque and countless communal riots.

I wish I could come up with his name. Perhaps, he is Edmund Burke. But I perfectly remember his indignation when he bitterly remarked "Don't talk to me of majority. What crimes are committed in thy name." The inconveniences of being on the lesser side are often aggravated by the indiscreet rhetorics of over enthusiastic advocates, taking an issue or dogma to the extremity. Obviously, the extreme nature does not conciliate, rather injure deeply held sentiments. They stoke the fire, provide the provocation.

Then how the root causes of these inconveniences can be eliminated. By JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS. They should be cultivated with a sincere resolve. So that the foundations of the state and society draw strength and inspiration from these elements of equality and trust. A just and fair society gradually takes root. They nourish diversity and allows the natural process to develop and maintain harmonious coexistence between communities.

Extremism of both dogma and issue disrupt this natural process. Justice and fairness are great builders of confidence in a situation which is complex. The smaller ethnic groups and communities feel subdued and overwhelmed by the numerical superiority of the larger group. They feel apart. And may even withdraw into a sense of alienation. From there, even rational exercises of the bigger community are not properly understood. The larger communities, on the other hand, often judge the smaller ones on perceived notions. They perceive a lack of involvement on the other side. A studied detachment which does not learn to live with the bigness of the other as a fact of life.

Only affirmative cultivation of justice and firmness can bring about a functional integration. Where justice reigns, society settles into a wholesome environment and a sensible attitude. The citizens on the lesser sides receive what they deserve and earn. In such a society, the inconveniences no longer scar the minds of the lesser partners. All said and done, what is needed most, is a sincere beginning of efforts to build trust and harmony through strengthening the foundations and the branches of justice and fairness.