

DELHI is full of marvellous names: Maharani Bagh, Sunehri Bagh, Punjabi Bagh, Gulmohar Park, Green Park. The list is a long one. The colonies and the names are free India's contribution to the national capital. The colonies are an expression of the ever-expanding and relentless march of suburbia outwards from the British-built New Delhi and the names a nostalgia for the greenery that is, alas, no more.

When the British decided to build New Delhi they took the dry and dusty plains around Raisina Hill, and over a period of three decades turned it into a mass of greenery. The best thing about the British-built capital is not the Government buildings, full of mock Roman grandeur but the avenues of trees that line its wide boulevards. Fifty years after Hutvens had them laid out they have attained their full glory, and today they turn New Delhi's roads into shaded forest glades. What a joy it is to drive down Tilak Marg with its massive "imli" trees, or the winding Sunehri Bagh road with its tall "jamuns"!

Coming in to land at Delhi airport one sees all the Delhis that there are: The crowded mass of Shahjahanabad clustered around the Red Fort; the forest of trees that

New Delhi; and finally the cement concrete desert that stretches as far as the eye can see towards Mathura. That is our contribution to this historic site. A city mirrors the mind of its builders. The Delhi of the Sultans, of the Lodhis and of the Mughals displays a vision and a grandeur that is worthy of the rulers and the age. The British addition to Delhi displays the practical good sense and the love of nature that is the hallmark of this trader-imperialist nation.

Our own contribution displays a pettiness and small-mindedness that can only astound the stranger. One would have imagined that the men who were laying out the numerous South Delhi colonies were imbued with a sense of history. They would think of India's capital and its needs of fifty, if not a hundred, years hence. When the British laid out their bit of the capital the car had barely appeared on the world scene. No one could visualise the river of motor traffic that flows down Delhi roads today.

Yet their roads made provision for it. A hundred years after his passing Napoleon's Paris is still green and open and the first city of the world. Some might argue that the example is not valid for a poor country. Peking proves the fatuousness of the argument.

In Death as in life

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

The fact is that the builders of South Delhi were imbued with small ambitions. How to make more money seemed to have been their prime concern. The need for wide open roads, adequate drains and above all trees and parks to cool the hot Arravalli rock that is Delhi was sacrificed for the sake of a few more plots to sell to India's hungry middle class. And so their gift to the city is not a "jamun", or "kikkar" or "imli" forest. It is a cement and concrete forest. Here and there a tiny plot has been left out as an apology for a park.

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Along the roads, of course, there is no space for trees. If planted, there would be no chance of their survival. In summer, when the hot sandy blasts of "loo" sweep down from the deserts of Rajasthan, the names Maharani Bagh, Sunehri Bagh and Green Park — with their evocation of cool forest glades and maybe a gentle meandering stream — must seem a cruel joke.

This is not all. Sitting one

autumn evening with Professor Raymond Allchin in a Cambridge college, I faced the full blast of his anger. If a Cambridge Don can display emotion, Professor Allchin did. A distinguished authority on Indian archaeology, he remonstrated with me in chaste Hindustani: "Your people have destroyed the archaeological treasures of South Delhi. All that area is one vast treasure trove waiting to be dug. The layers go as far back as the first habitations of man on this ancient site. And what have you done? Mutilated every site. Built over each piece of diggable land. Even the monuments have not been spared. To be seen and appreciated in their true setting they need space. What your planners have done is to build houses right up to their walls."

I listened in sad silence, for I knew it was all too true. The Lodhi Gardens is one way of retaining historical monuments. The jostling of noble buildings by vulgar middle class housing is another.

The other day a misfortune took me to Green Park. We were looking for the cremation ground located there. The cars found their way through crowded narrow lanes with considerable difficulty. Finally we came to a dead end. Right in the middle of the colony was a small shabby open space, surrounded by housing. Overgrown with wild grass weeds and bushes, it also appeared to be the local dumping ground for junk. Bits of glass, paper cartons, broken beer bottles, and sundry other riches of our civilisation littered the area. Down its middle ran a "ganda nallah." Pigs wallowed in it and nosed about in the rubbish. The keeper of the place might have been the gateman of Dante's Hell.

Half a dozen pyres were in various stages of burning. We too prepared ours while the pigs and the naked children wandered about amongst us. Even as we went about the task, other unfortunate groups arrived. Delhi is after all a vast city and its cremation grounds can get congested. Having set fire to the pyres the groups sat among the pigs and the weeds, praying for the departed. The smoke and the ash blew into neighbouring balconies from where children and housewives watched this eternal drama of life.

A wash at the hand pump, a

haggle with the keeper over the charges for his services, and we hastened to quit the dismal scene. The only clean thing about the place was the fire. Walking away from the whole macabre scene, I wondered about those whose misfortune it was to live over looking this place. At night in their comfortable couches, even while creating new life, they must perforce watch the destruction of the old.

One would imagine that a cremation ground would be situated in a wide open space with plenty of trees and cover, well away from residential areas. It would have green lawns shady trees, clean benches and an adequate supply of water. The Indian is born in poverty and struggles against it all through life. All the time he is surrounded by squalor. It is rarely his good fortune to have in life the wherewithal for beautiful living. Surely he is entitled to a decent exit from this struggle.

Of what use are the skyscrapers and the five-star hotels of New Delhi if the going of its citizens is as full of filth and squalor as their coming? What the people of Delhi need are a dozen beautifully appointed cremation grounds to speed them on to new and, hopefully, better worlds.