

# SUNDAY READING

## DOWN WITH THOSE FOUNTAINS!

WHY is it that our city fathers (I include in this category both officers and elected public men) are friends of fountains and foes of parks? This may seem a harsh query but seems valid, at least to my knowledge of Punjab.

Many, many years ago my first posting was as Sub Divisional Officer, Mahindergarh. This is a desert district lying on the fringe of Rajasthan. Its modest headquarters are at Narnaul, a town of some little glory in Mughal days, but now nothing more than a village that clusters around the ruins of Birbal's "chhatta". Narnaul surrounded by sand and lacking in water, has no park, and hardly any trees. Drinking water, in fact, is its major problem.

Nevertheless, one fine morning the city fathers decided to give themselves a fountain. Narnaul boasted no wide boulevards, and all it had was a thin ribbon of a road, from the tiny railway station which passed one train a day to the ancient and crumbling fort which housed the Deputy Commissioner's courts. The problem, therefore, was where to locate the fountain. The city fathers were not daunted. It was decided to build it in the sands, outside the railway station.

And so, one fine morning, the Deputy Commissioner of the day came to inaugurate this magnificent new acquisition. A "lota" of water, which might have been of more immediate use for a citizen was poured in at one end and came out in a little dribble at the other. Everybody clapped and cheered, and went home. The fountain, of course, never worked after that and remains a monument to the folly of the city

fathers of the day.

A little later I was posted to Jullundur under the redoubtable Sri Chand Chhabra, a man of tremendous passion and energy. He was just launching out into the frenzy of city reconstruction which took him to the Presidency of the New Delhi Municipal Committee his subsequent removal and recent reinstatement. I admire much in Chhabra for men of passion are lacking in this country. Perhaps the climate is against it. He did indeed clean out parts of Jullundur widening roads and putting up street-lights even, filling in a dirty pond, to lay out a municipal swimming pool. But there is something I can never forgive him for. He initiated the first cutting into the Nehru Gardens for the sake of a road.

The British, who are lovers of nature and gardens, had at least one thing to their credit. To every city they gave a garden named after the East India Company. Jullundur too had a magnificent Company Bagh, which was subsequently called Nehru Gardens. To people living in tiny rooms in congested mohallas these gardens were a veritable boon. Even the small man could clear his lungs and breathe fresh air for a while in a garden which only the rich could normally afford. Chhabra committed the sacrilege to my mind, of pushing back the garden, in order to somewhat needlessly widen the roads around it.

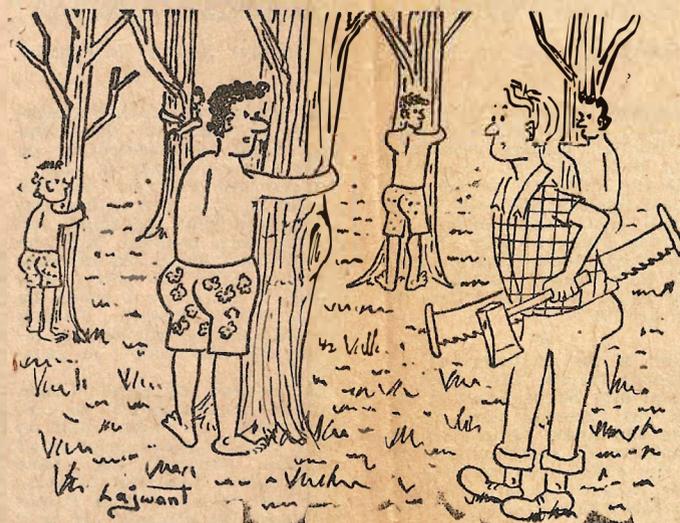
In England a public park would never have given way to a road. Once started, the process of nibbling continued. Roads were further widened, some unnecessarily, municipal buildings put up in the middle of the garden, and trees cut down. Today, in essence, the garden is no more, and it makes one grieve to think that a builder of Sri Chand Chhabra's qualities committed the original sin.

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A similar tragedy overtook the Rakh Bagh at Ludhiana. When I was a student in the local Government College, Rakh Bagh was indeed a minor city forest. Soon the bureaucracy began to nibble at it. Houses for magistrates and local bigwigs started coming up. More roads than were needed were cut through in all directions, and today the Rakh Bagh is no more. In a crowded city the size of Ludhiana, to mutilate the only available park was no less than a crime. Dr M. S. Randhawa made a belated effort to replace this garden by creating a rose garden. It is to be seen how long that will last.

As a small aside I might mention what happened to the Government College. Set up in the twenties, it boasted of the most magnificent hockey ground, surrounded by ancient trees, planted and nourished personally by Principal Harvey. In fact, the trees were the glory of the college. How

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many were the classes which we attended in the open air, in the shade of these magnificent giants in the best style of Shantiniketan. Of all people a former Principal was stricken by a bout of vandalism — I call it no less. He had them all cut down. Perhaps they obstructed his view.

Consider this, in contrast to an Assistant Commissioner of Kulu. Long ago somebody decided that the magnificent pines along the Beas river near the Forest Rest House at Manali should be cut down. These were more than 100 years old. The Assistant Commissioner racked his brain for some way to prevent this horrible destruction. Finally he declared them protected monuments under an Act of the Government of India.

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One would imagine that a park is an area with green and well kept lawns, trees and flowers beds, where the citizens can spend some hours of leisure. At best a few benches may be added, though in our dry climate even these are unnecessary. But our city fathers love to cut down the green areas and lay out the most vulgar fountains imaginable.

As one goes into Ludhiana along the Ring Road one passes Model Town. Near the railway crossing on the left there is a tiny triangular park. In one corner it used to have a little bust of Chhattar Singh, an N.C.C. student who died while doing social service. The park

was a pleasant patch of green for people to relax in.

On a recent visit I found that the bust has been knocked over and the empty pedestal remains. As for the park, the misguided zeal of some city fathers had placed a massive cement stone circle in it. The grass is no more and this vulgar and expensive concrete horror shimmers in the heat of the Indian sun.

The glory of Patiala was the Baradari Garden. I say "was" because much of it has already departed. More and more roads are being cut or widened through it, and the green is giving way to the asphalt. I was horror-struck last year to read a report in The Tribune that a new Secretariat is to be put in the middle of it by cutting down the trees. I protested for whatever it was worth. I hope better sense prevailed and that the people of Patiala will not be denied this little luxury of a garden in their midst.

In the old days, as one entered Patiala, one drove along a canal which used to pass through a long and pleasant strip of green. The canal ultimately choked up, but the green was still available to the mohalla residents on its fringe. Now, alas, a fountain with paved walks is being inflicted on this patch. I should imagine that it is much more pleasant to walk on the grass than on cement or stone pavements.

In Chandigarh, too, behind

my house in Sector 7, the lake road going south is being given the dubious pleasure of a stone pavement at great cost. I can understand such pavements in England, where it is always wet and where one cannot walk on the grass, but in our country it is the other way round. The pavements turn hot while the grass helps to cut the temperature down.

Why is all this being done? Is it that our city fathers have more money than they need? Have they finished discharging their basic duties to the citizens, namely, those of laying out arrangements for clean water, proper sewerage and well-kept roads? The answer is obvious, and yet our city fathers continue to build sterile monuments to themselves, in the best Tughlaq tradition. I wish somebody would beg of them to stop.

In Garhwal, unscrupulous forest contractors, with the help of unscrupulous elements in the administration, have been mercilessly felling the forests on which the future, both of the hill people and those of the plains, depends. Finally, the innocent hill men and women of these remote areas started a "Chipko Andolan". When the contractors came to cut the trees men, women and children would simply go and hug these sustainers of life and refuse to submit them to the cruel saw. Maybe the citizens of our towns need to do something similar to save the remaining patches of green from the misguided zeal of our city fathers.

What we need are trees and not fountains, but of course in the best tradition of Marie Antoinette, we must have cakes rather than bread.