

A rare get-together

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

POSSIBLY the most exclusive Indian club is a worldwide group of Punjabis. Since Punjabis are spread over the far corners of the globe, the membership perforce has to be an international one.

Of course, it is another matter that when the members, like good Americans, decide to exchange visiting cards, they discover that they all hail from within 20 miles of Nawanshahr Doaba.

The membership of this club is hard to come by, but the committee does not have to sweat over selections. The nature of the club ensures a process of automatic self-selection. A body of dedicated epicurians, the members usually meet in far-off places

Thus meetings are more likely to be held in London, New York, Los Angeles, maybe even Paris, rather than on their native soil. Those who aspire to membership have, therefore, to be reasonably well loaded to be able to afford the fare, in every sense of the word.

Last winter the club had a rare get-together in a North Indian State. A powerful organisation, complete with reception, catering, lodging and publicity committees was set up. It might have been a Con-

gress session, considering all the preparations.

I ran into one of these busy committees and enquired about the programme. Between huge laughs members of the committee told me: "Jollification".

I tried gently to suggest a purpose beyond food and drink. Could they not, with their rich international membership, consider providing funds for research into subjects of interest to Punjab?

ENTHUSIASM

Or maybe an exchange of students every year between Punjab and its international citizens? They showed polite enthusiasm for my suggestions.

The annual get-together was attended by members from the far corners of the world. The local captains of government and industry were only too happy to attend a gala evening. Nothing was wanting in the way of hospitality.

The evening dragged on into the early hours of the morning. While the well-heeled Punjabis had their evening of fellowship, their poorer brethren waited all night for the crumbs from the tables of the rich. The bandobast men ensured that the cocoon of the

distinguished members was not shattered by any unseemly sights.

Another day of fun and it was time for these busy people to jet home. Before leaving in an exercise of mutual administration they conferred honours on a few of their members. Of the land and its people they hardly took any notice.

There are other such organisations in the country too. I once made the mistake of attending the annual function of a Rotary Club. They started fairly early in the evening. To start with, there were speeches in praise of the retiring office-bearers.

As is common in this country, the praise was beyond belief. Then a report was read out. Their service to the community consisted of a welcome sign planted on the G-T Road, a few cloth banners urging the observance of traffic laws, and the planting of a dozen trees most of which had already withered away.

LOCAL SETHS

Considering that the gathering was full of local seths, the social service claimer was rather feeble in substance. The

new office-bearers were then put on display.

More speeches followed. By then we had been watching the proceedings for almost four hours and had given up all hope of eating that night. I visualised an all night jagrata, with hymns in praise of the Rotarians, but no food.

I pleaded with the man who had persuaded us to come. At last the food was laid out on the tables at the far end of the hall. I foolishly imagined that, having endured a string of speeches for four hours, we had earned the first go at the food.

There was also the delicate matter of host-guest relations to be respected. Unfortunately, the Rotarians were not burdened with such bourgeois values.

Like a well-trained battalion they moved in on the food tables. Guests who could not get out of the way were trampled over. At the table they stood elbow to elbow like a Roman phalanx, determined to keep strangers away.

My wife and I had fortunately escaped the first rush of the hungry, and stood despondently in a corner. Up came my host and asked cheerfully: "Why are you not eating, sir?"

"I am waiting for the Rotarians to finish," I replied, and walked away.