

# SUNDAY READING

## GREY BEARDS, GREEN HEDGES

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

WE were sipping iced nimboo-pani with some friends. The conversation was about life at Chandigarh.

"What is there to do in this dull city?" exploded the husband in virile Punjabi. "All you get here are serving or retired bureaucrats, and a duller lot would be hard to find. This city is like Bournemouth, a watering place for the superannuated. There is no cultural life, no political controversy, not even a worthwhile jalsa or riot. All it can boast of is 'chittian dahrrian te harian jharian'" (white beards and green hedges).

### WISHY-WASHY

I tried to defend the place. What about the Leisure Valley, the Rose Garden and the magnificent range of flowering trees that produce a welter of colours in April and May? There was, after all, Corbuser's Museum, and the goings-on at the Tagore Theatre.

My friend was not convinced. The cultural life, he said, was all wishy-washy — nothing to write home about. "The Chandigarh social scene consists only of 'chathh te ikatth' (house warming ceremony and gathering of mourners). Everybody is busy building houses and flats. The wives spend the long summer days supervising the mixing of cement and sand while the sweat trickles down

their powdered faces, scouring the landscape like Hosniapur choes. The husbands are busy buying nuts and bolts at the cheapest shops in town.

"The great day is the 'chathh' of the house, when after an overdose of prayers meant, I suppose, to protect the property of the rich against the threat from the poor, everybody gorges himself on 'chhole-bhathure'. The net gain is an upset stomach. The 'ikatth's are of course as frequent as the 'chathh's'.

"After all, in this town there is a steady stream of grey beards leaving for Valhalla. These are mournful occasions, but at least you get to meet everyone, as you wait under the sheesham trees in Sector 25."

### FITNESS FIENDS

I think my friend was unduly pessimistic. The senior citizens of Chandigarh are not likely to leave in a hurry for happy hunting grounds elsewhere. They are in fact fitness fiends, determined to make a hole in

the Government's pension pocket for as long as they can. Half the town lives only for the early morning (or shall I say the late night) "sair" to the Lake. From about 3 O'clock in the morning all roads lead to the Lake front. The motley crowd has to be seen to be believed.

### FAT LALAS

There are the fat Lalas from the mandi, propelling their stomachs along, with their fatter spouses waddling behind them. They wear a martyr's look, as they struggle along in a fruitless endeavour to knock off yesterday's kilo of barfi. The dyspeptic-looking retired civil servants and the sad-eyed judges are followed by the well-fed advocates, who wear the self-satisfied looks of those to whom both man and law owe much. The fading beauties in jeans are, of course, powdered even at that unearthly hour.

The white beards come in convoys like grey partridges. The retired Kenyans, all in

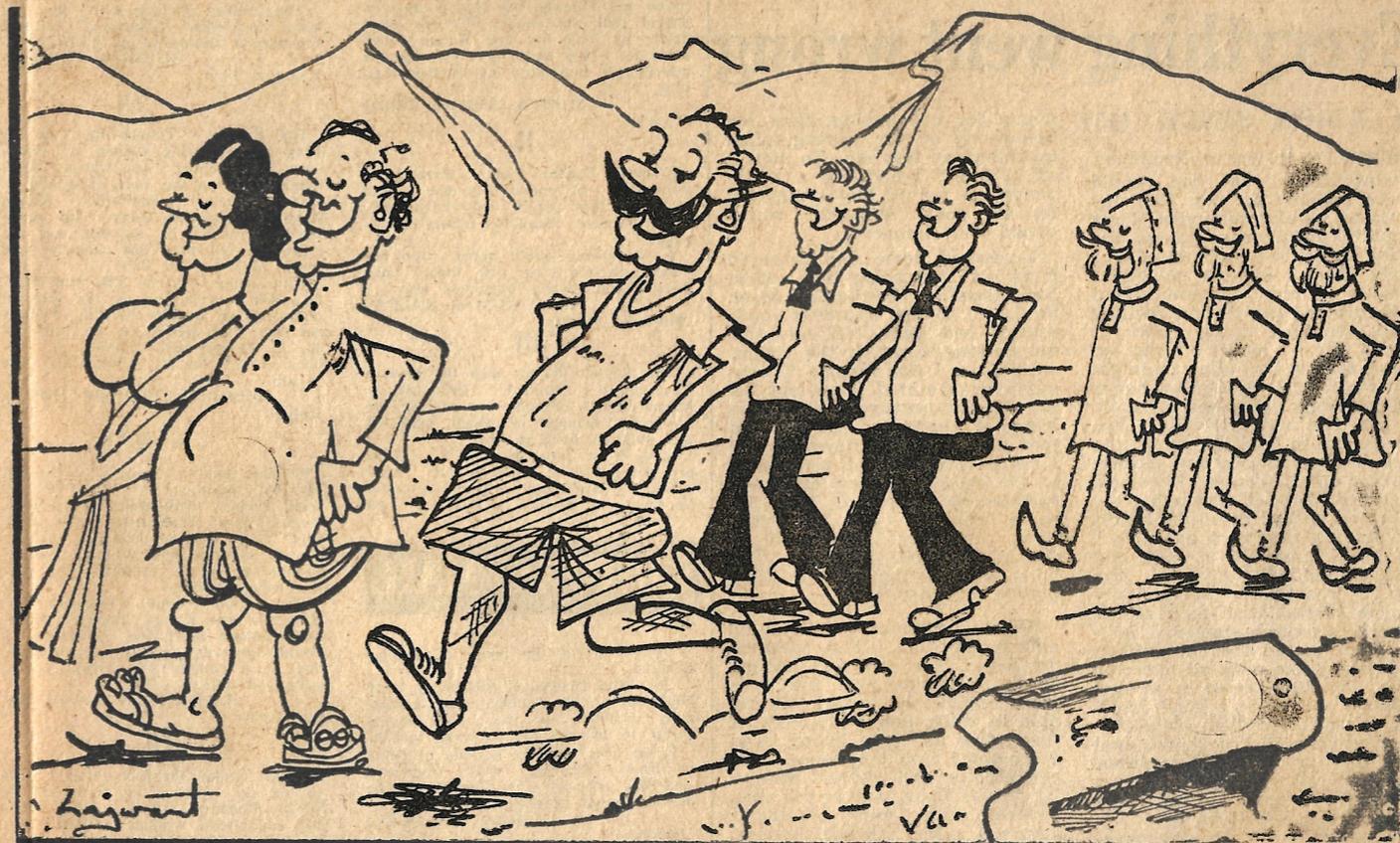
white turbans and looking like the Safari king Joginder Singh, stand out among everyone. They are a cheerful lot whose peals of laughter ring across the silent Lake. There are the religious ones, who sit at the water's edge waiting to do "surya namaskar" as the sun rises majestically across the water and over the far hills.

### MEASURED STEPS

There is even the odd soldier or retired policeman in knaki shorts — knee length and two feet wide at the bottom — walking the Lake bandh in measured and modulated steps. Of course, the retired army brass as a whole are contemptuous of the "sair" wallahs. Built as they are like greyhounds, with perfect waists even in old age, they have no paunches to shed. They prefer, therefore, a proper game of golf in the morning and a chhota peg at sundown.

All these and many more go long before sunrise to savour the tranquillity of Corbu's Lake. Having spent that golden hour by the placid waters below the mountains, many of them have nothing else to do except wait out the remaining hours of the day till the magic moment comes to put on one's shorts in the darkness, and to head north in the company of the friends of one's youth.

Since the schools are closed these days, a few young people



in our lane have also taken it into their heads to copy their elders and go for early morning "sair". My daughter came

home from one of these and asked anxiously: "Papa, why do all the old people walking along the Lake keep saying to

each other: 'Oh, there is much gar-bar in the country, and nothing is right anywhere.'"

I tried as best I could to ex-

plain to her that it is the privilege of the young to be optimistic and the tragedy of the old to be sadly pessimistic.