

In Chandigarh you can't avoid the topic. The conversation invariably turns to house building.

"In which sector have you built your house?" Someone asks.

"I haven't built one", I answer.

"Oh, I suppose, you are still at the planning stage". He asks looking a little anxious.

"I am afraid I haven't thought of one yet". I answer defensively.

"But surely you have bought a plot", he exclaims, looking really desperate now.

"I am sorry, I haven't". I answer feeling like a murderer.

The conversation flows away leaving me high and dry, like some piece of flotsam on the river bank after the floods.

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Another house; another company.

They are discussing glazed verandahs.

"I have glazed the entire east verandah", says Mrs. B—the wife of a senior official.

"Oh you have; How lovely!" exclaims Mrs. C—the wife of a not so senior official.

"Well you know, I had to. He has so much work to attend to even at home and he loves to sit in the sun."

B-smirks, exuding self importance.

Mrs. C—turns on her husband.

"Darling I told you, that we should glaze our verandah."

"You know the expense he begins somewhat tamely.

Oh you are always saying we can't afford this and we can't afford that . . . surely you can take another loan from government."

At this stage I butt in. I can no longer restrain my curiosity.

"Excuse me what is a glazed verandah?"

Aghast at my ignorance they all stare in dumb disbelief.

You could hear a pin fall. Someone explains at last in a cutting half sentence. I feel like something the cat brought in.

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On a Sunday afternoon I decide to drop in on my friend G:—

Only the children are at home.

# A House In Chandigarh

"Where is daddy?" I ask, Uncle, he has gone to the brick kiln at Mani Majra".

"And mummy?"

"She is at the plot, uncle. You know we are building a house".

I decide to wait. A little later G—drives in, a harassed expression on his face.

"Well dash it, these chaps are impossible" he exclaims. "First I spend weeks and weeks hanging around government offices for a permit for bricks, and now when I go to the kiln, the man says,

'sorry, no bricks sir. Come back in two weeks' time'.

The house is at roof level, another monsoon shower may come any day, and I am paying so much to the labourer daily. What am I to do?" I sympathise.

Mrs. G—comes in from the plot, tired, awfully sun burnt and caked with dust.

"Oh, these labourers are impossible", she cries half in tears. "They come at ten, want a bidi break every one hour, and a nap in the afternoon. If I so much as hint at their laziness they talk about their Union and demonstration.

I bustle around to the kitchen. I guess the G-s could do with a hot cup of tea. If only I had a nip of brandy on me.

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I look through my morning mail.

Mr. & Mrs. C—request the pleasure of the company of Shri — on the occasion of Grah Pravesh . . . . .

Another one! I groan inwardly. I dread these 'Grah Praveshes, One has to sit all morning on one's ankles while the priests perform 'Ilavana' and 'Akhand Patha'. The proceedings are rounded off with a little tepid tea. I am all for the good old house warming parties, but in these days of rising prices who would like to waste precious Government loans on a few bottles of . . . . .

I go late and sit at the back. Every one is fidgety — the priests have been at it for two hours; the ladies are carrying on whispered conversations, I eavesdrop.

"What a horrid colour scheme".

"The elevation is really poor. Looks like a match box."

"What vulgar use of marble. More like a Seth's house".

The ladies are evidently sharpening the knives:

At last the priest stops. We are taken around the house. The ladies are simply delighted.

"Oh darling what a pretty house!"

"The loveliest in Chandigarh".

The host and hostess stand at the gate, their faces a little drawn and anxious. We all file past.

"Congratulations jee. Thank you jee."

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In the morning X—rings me.

"I say old chap, could you do me a favour?"

"Certainly, my dear fellow".

"Well you know my house . . . .

"Yes, a lovely one."

"Well, I want to rent it out. You know what with the loan instalment and all that I am a little anxious. I am sure if you spoke to D—"

"Why, certainly. Most certainly."

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A house in Chandigarh?  
Not for me!

— M. S. GILE