

MAGAZINE

THE OLD MEN OF SOUTHALL

"There they sit!" cried my guide excitedly as we spied a group of old men sitting on a park bench in Southall. His voice had the thrill of one who had spotted a covey of partridges in a Punjab field during a winter shoot. "They are here every day without fail at exactly the same time. You could set your watch by their arrival."

We parked the car and walked over towards them in the summer sunshine. On other benches spread in the park I noticed a number of old Sikhs sitting in solitary contemplation of the scene. In the far corner of the grounds was a children's and ladies park. Punjabi women sat gossiping in small huddles on the grass. The children romped about on

the swings. By the side of a rose bush a young English couple was soaking in the summer sun. The man had his shirt off and the girl was stroking his back with obvious pleasure. The Punjabis seemed not to notice this intrusion on their moral sensibilities.

We walked over to the group of old men and I said 'Sat Sri Akal.' They were not pleased to see us, and showed almost an Englishman's reserve. I tried to start a conversation. They would not respond. They were suspicious. Who was I? What did I want? Could I be some one trying to probe their past; some one who would rat to the Police about an improper entry into the U.K. In Britain Indians prefer not to talk to

countrymen who happen to be strangers.

Slowly I won them over, and they opened up. As I had guessed they hailed from the Jullundur — Hoshiarpur region. Two were minor officials on retirement from the Railways and Post Office; the others plain villagers. Their sole purpose, to earn an old age pension for the family; their chief problem the passing of idle hours. Living in crowded houses, the old people get in the way of daughters-in-law who still observe the 'purdah' and a thousand other restrictions. In Punjab the old grandfather goes out to the fields or the village 'chaupal'. He does small useful tasks to pass the time of day, and be out of the way. When in the evening he



'Oh, my sun-kissed Punjab!'

comes home he coughs a warning to the womenfolk who cover their faces. Where does an old man go in the rain; sleet and cold of England? Sunny days when he can go to the park are rare. So he sits at home and dreams of the sun-kissed Punjab; of his youth and the friends who are no more. To the women of the house he is a burden. Said one, "yes, we would like to go back if we could get tickets. The climate is not good here. Too much rheumatism and joint pains."

Their prejudices were pathetic, said the Post Office man who claimed some knowledge of the world. "The food here is not good. It does not give strength. My son was a wrestler in Punjab. You should have seen him there. Fed on home made ghee, he was the champion of the Doaba. Here he

is wasting away, though I feed him all the butter and milk he can take. No, the food here gives no nourishment. It is 'phoka'.

I asked them to pose for a picture. The Hoshiarpur elder in the worker's cap was straight away suspicious. No, no, not a photo. I assured them I was a harmless student. The old man with the grand daughter came to my aid, "Why don't you allow a photo? He means well. It is not every day that some one wants to photograph us old men," he argued. Reluctantly they were persuaded but they sat stiff and ill at ease. As we parted they asked wistfully that I let people know at home they were well, and hoping to come back some day.

— M. S. Gill



They sat stiff and ill at ease . . .