

The Model Town that

IN the 1950's going to Model Town was almost always a two-day affair, for it was considered so far away that one slept the night there. As all my father's uncles and aunts resided there, it was like second home. We called it the "town in the forest". But if ever there was a dream 'town' that the people of old Lahore built for themselves, this was it.

Model Town, which was originally conceived as an ideal town, was the brain child of a lawyer of Bhati Gate called Dewan Khem Chand. He claimed that the idea came to him as a "vision" when he was only 14 years old... for he did not like the narrow winding streets of the old walled city. He dreamed of an open city in the middle of the forests where: "one could run with no end in sight". During his studies in England Dewan Khem Chand put his idea on paper in January 1921 and titled it "My Scheme". His dream was to buy 1,000 acres of

land and to build a 'modern town'.

On his return to Lahore, he improved on his original "My Scheme" and wrote another paper titled "Ideal Town", a place where people of every religion and faith lived in perfect harmony. "To achieve this, it is essential to allow humans to have sufficient space to achieve a serene state of mind". With this in mind he went to meet the original Father of Modern Lahore, Sir Ganga Ram, a man we today love to forget.

Sir Ganga Ram was a very practical and generous man. He immediately rejected the idea of having this "ideal town" on the other side of the River Ravi near Shahdara, saying that his 'ideals' would be swept away by flood every third year. Seeing him so dejected, Sir Ganga Ram got up and took Dewan Khem Chand in his car to see the "Rakh Kot Lakhpatt Reserved Forest". Later Khem Chand was to write he "immedi-

ately fell in love with the place.

On the advice of Sir Ganga Ram, Dewan Khem Chand applied for 1,963 acres of land from the government, after a new society was formed as a company and was registered under the Co-operatives Societies Act. The Forest department would just not agree to the scheme of this "town in the middle of their forest". For two years Dewan Khem Chand ran from pillar to post. In the end he asked Sir Ganga Ram for ideas. We do not know which string Sir Ganga Ram pulled, but within days he got his permission. On January 5, 1923, the land was handed over to the Model Town Co-operative Society.

The first meeting of the society was held in the Lahore Town Hall on February 27, 1921, in which Sir Ganga Ram was elected the first chairman and Dewan Khem Chand the first secretary. In this meeting the word 'Model Town'

was suggested and adopted "till such time a more suitable name was found". After the meeting the plan was presented to Raja Narendra Nath, who on reading the 'scheme' threw it into his waste paper basket. It was when Sir Shadi Lal mentioned that it was very practical, and that Sir Ganga Ram thought it was an excellent idea, that he sent for a new copy and backed it to the hilt.

For the planning of Model Town, an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper with the stipulation that it should incorporate the best of our "own culture, as well as the best of Western culture". A grand prize of Rs.1,220 was offered. A total of 32 plans were received. They were placed on The Mall for public comment. Four plans were selected, and as the 'selection committee' liked all four they divided the prize money among all four. The second prize winner was paid an

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additional Rs.500/- to incorporate all the four plans into one. "The town is square in shape with a circle in the middle. Four rectangles link the square to the circle, with eight triangles making up the residential quarters". The society bye-laws stipulated that there could be only one house per plot allotted with two-thirds being left for open for lawns and gardens. The plot sizes were also planned a being of six kanals, four kanals and two kanals only. They were classified as A,B and C class plots.

The membership was selected with great care. Dewan Khem Chand was to write later: "All members are literate, belonging to the upper and upper middle class, and people with clean records". The society hired a well-known architect by name of M.C. Khanna, who designed a total of 100 houses. The first "flush system" houses in Lahore were introduced using the "Kentucky pattern", which

worked with great efficiency. Dewan Khem Chand himself built a 'C' class house in 1930 within a record 32 days at a cost of Rs.6,500.

The Model Town Society banned all commercial advertising as it "debases residential living". They banned beggary in the society. A massive community services plan was launched which included a dairy farm, a poultry yard, an orchard and six acres were reserved for children to play in a nursery.

The most remarkable aspect of Model Town was how well they integrated people of every religious community. Special funds were raised to build a Mandir for Hindus, a Mosque for Muslims and a Gurdwara for the Sikhs. A cremation ground was set aside, and a graveyard planned.

Over the years, Model Town has undergone a dramatic change. From the original 184 members in 1920 with a population of less than 2,000 persons, by 2002 the popula-

tion of Model Town had grown to 70,000 plus. Crass commercialism has taken over and even commercial establishments allowed within residential houses. Like the rest of Pakistan, commercialism has beaten back the private space and lives of the citizens of this ideal town.

Recent attempts to reverse this commercial thrust have been beaten when elected office-bearers were ousted by political-cum-commercial interests. Slowly and steadily, the original dream of Dewan Khem Chand is being pushed back, as house sizes get smaller, residential spaces are being used by commercial offices... the movement to reach a slum status is approximately half achieved. The bus service has ceased to exist. The dairy closed long ago. The Father of Modern Lahore, Sir Ganga Ram, had no idea just how badly the city he loved so much would be pushed back in time.—MAJID SHEIKH