

Lahore. A darbar of the elected

By Intikhab Hanif

THE colonial Darbar Hall in the Punjab Civil Secretariat is an architectural treasure which has existed hidden from the public eye for long. The magnificent hall was restored a decade ago and still reflects the taste of its English builders.

According to information gathered from

the Punjab Archives Department, it was the first hall of its kind constructed for the first elected legislative council of Punjab that came into being in January 1921 under the Government of India Act 1919. The council comprised 93 members and its first session was held in the Darbar Hall on

January 8, 1921.

Before the construction of this hall the council members, who were then nominated, had no place of their own to hold meetings in Lahore. They had met in the Governor's House, Lawrence Hall and the Punjab University's Senate Hall. In summers, they would hold their sessions in Simla.

The 1921 council was larger than the councils of the past. The Darbar Hall inside the Governor's House's was considered too small for its meetings. The secretary, government of



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India, wrote to the Punjab chief secretary on January 29, 1920, on the subject of suitable buildings for parliamentary bodies.

He said the existing buildings being used for council chambers in India were not only too small but also unsuitable on other counts, and that it would not be fit to hold meetings of the provincial legislative councils in ball-rooms or chambers in the governors' offices.

He directed the construction of a permanent building for the Punjab legislative council and until this was achieved, he said a temporary building should be constructed within the shortest possible time.

At that time the Punjab government had

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plans of shifting the civil secretariat to the Charing Cross on The Mall. The new proposed secretariat was also supposed to have a legislative council hall and attached offices and was to be constructed in around six years. Given this, it was decided that a temporary hall be constructed in the existing civil secretariat.

On January 31, 1920, a meeting chaired by the Punjab governor and council president Sir Edward Maclagan approved the proposal. The master plan was made with input from the governor, provincial reform commissioner, M C J Hallifax, and chief secretary, John Pernott Thompson. It was based on a design by Punjab government's consultant architect, Basil M Sullivan.

The construction started on May 6, 1920. The building was completed in record time, by December 1920. It cost Rs430,651 and included council chambers or the Darbar Hall, its attached offices, committee room, retiring room, offices of the executive council members, ministers and their staff, governor and his secretaries, chief secretary and the financial secretary.

Besides modern sanitation, the building was given power and telephone services. Costly teak wood was used for wall panelling and for furniture.

Delivering a historic speech in the first session of the council in the Darbar Hall, Punjab Governor Sir Edward Maclagan said: "The large increase in the

council and additional staff required for the members of the executive council and the ministers have necessitated the creation of the new building in which we are meeting. The arrangements here are, as you will observe, not yet quite complete, but when I inform you that the architect received the first orders on the February 5, last (1920) and that the building was commenced on the May 6, you will agree with me that our best thanks and congratulations are due to the architects, engineers and contractors by whom we have been provided with a fabric so large and so well designed which has "risen an exhalation" in so short a period of time.

"The council was, as you are aware, developed into its present form in an unprecedented short period of time. For the first 10 years of my service in India, the province had no legislative council of any kind, and when a council was established for the first time in 1897, it was an entirely nominated council of nine members only. From this we moved in the 1910 to an almost entirely nominated council of 24 and after a short interval of 10 years this has developed into the almost entirely elected council of 93, which has met today.

"When we compare this progress with the rate at which parliamentary institutions have developed in England and elsewhere, we may well at times have apprehensions as to the results."

The members of this council included Mian Fazle Hussain, Malik Feroze Khan Noon,

Sikandar Hayat Khan, Muhammad Ajmal Khan Leghari, Nawab Sir Amiruddin Ahmad Khan, Mian Muhammad Shah Din, Chaudhry Shahabuddin and Sardar Habibullah. Allama Muhammad Iqbal too was its member from 1927 to 1930 and attended its various sessions in the Darbar Hall.

The hall also has the honour of holding the first three sessions of the Punjab Legislative Assembly in January 1938. The assembly was elected under the 1935 Government of India Act.

The hall was made for only 93-member council. A more spacious assembly building was to later emerge at Charing Cross — on the site where the government had planned to have its entire secretariat. The foundation stone for the assembly building was laid on November 17, 1935, near The Mall's Charing Cross.

After the construction of the new assembly building the Darbar Hall was put to common official use. The offices of section officers in it were removed when the ministers' block in the civil secretariat was renovated during the reign of chief minister Mian Manzoor Wattoo.

The hall's renovation was conducted under the supervision of architect Nayyar Ali Dada but it remained locked for several years. It was renovated and reopened on the direction of Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi. Since January 2003 it is being used for cabinet and other official meetings under a changed name, Punjab Hall.