

The Makin
68/10

Though the origins of Lahore are obscure and lost in the mists of antiquity, one finds that this city has always played its role in history — at least in the history of the South Asian sub-continent. Apart from being a centre of trade and commerce, Lahore has been the focal point of political activity since the days when its history was recorded.

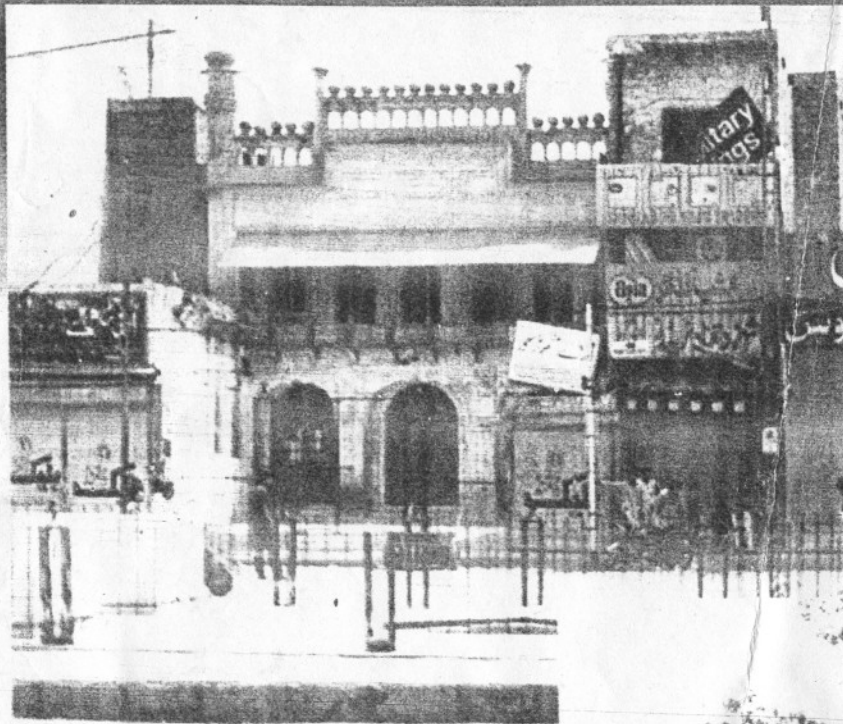
Close to a thousand years ago, Mahmood of Ghazni subjugated this part of the world. His progeny founded their kingdom here; Lahore became the capital of their empire. Half a millennium or so later, Lahore was again the centre of authority when it became the capital of the Moghul empire in the sub-continent in the Golden Age of the Moghuls during the days of Akbar.

When the English succeeded in capturing Lahore and occupying the country in 1849 they took certain steps the effect of which reached far into the times that followed. These steps were connected with the day to day working. One of the things that they encouraged or introduced was the running of affairs by collective decision. The first such place where such steps were given a practical shape was the Municipal Committee of Lahore, which was set up in 1862.

Apart from that, public-spirited men interested in encouraging the dissipation knowledge in the society organised bodies whose object, besides reviving scholarship was to encourage discussion of social and political questions of interest. It was not long before various movements came forward demanding reforms and asking for self-rule. It was here in Lahore that quite a few movements nurtured for over half a century culminating in self-rule in the sub-continent.

There are three places in Lahore which are noted for staging public meetings. All are close to the walled city. One is where the Minar-e-Pakistan stands today. North of the Fort of Lahore, there is a vast open space which has served different purposes over the years — rather, centuries. Till some decades ago it was known as the Minto Park. It used to be a green where people came from the city to take a breather. One could find *akharas* or wrestling pits or rings on the edges of the

Centre of political stage



Barkat Ali Islamia Hall

park where *dungals* or bouts were regularly held. On the occasion of Eid people were allowed to pitch *shamianas* or tents for prayers. On one such occasion, this scribe remembers, the Imam who was known to oppose the call for a separate homeland for the Muslims, said something against the Muslim League, a melee followed but was controlled by the police.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, early in the English days, the place served as a race course and part of it as a parade ground. Before that the place had been the scene of an artillery encampment when Sher Singh attacked the Fort of Lahore. The Park was the venue of last great meeting held in 1940 to pass the Lahore Resolution.

The other spot, too, is next to the (vanished) ramparts of the city but in the

south. That is the green patch outside Mochi Darwaaza. Every meeting of importance has taken place there. Opposite this place, on the other side of the Circular Road, there is a hall, the Barkat Ali Islamia Hall, another venue of meetings.

The third place is close to the mausoleum of

SAJID ABBAS
visits an old building and also narrates the various political scenes in this part of the world in the half century prior to Independence

Data Gunj Bukhsh on Rattigan Road. That is the Bradlaugh Hall, now hidden from unhindered view by the buildings that have come up during the last fifty years. The hall was built in the year 1900 and was named after Charles Bradlaugh MP. Charles Bradlaugh was connected with a set up in England, known as the Congress Agency and used to speak so much in favour of India in the British Parliament that he became known as 'the Member for India'.

The foundation stone of the Bradlaugh Hall was laid by Sir Surendra Nath Bannerji, founder and editor of 'Bengali'; Member of the Bengal Legislative Council and later, Member of the Indian Legislative Council. Sir Surendra Nath was an

accomplished public speaker having a good command of language. He formed the Indian Association in Calcutta in 1876 and called for the first National Conference in 1883, in Calcutta but gradually faded away when the Indian National Congress made its debut in Bombay, three years later.

The Minto Park, now the Iqbal Park, is well maintained. Visited by hundreds of people, both young and old, the Minar stands there commemorating the adopting of the Lahore Resolution. The Bagh Bairoon Mochi Darwaaza has a permanent dais or stage made of brick and mortar ready for anybody to hold a meeting there at short notice. The Barkat Ali Hall is in a reasonable state of repair.

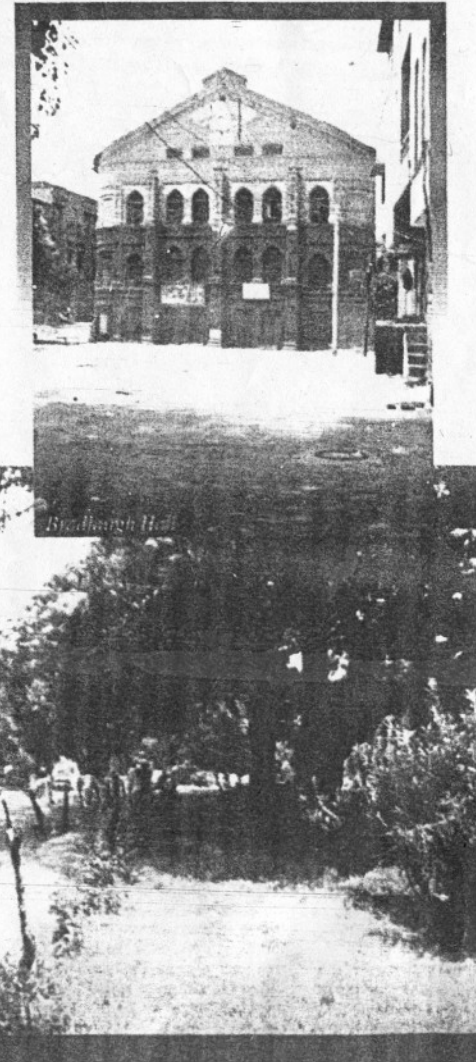
Though, the Bradlaugh Hall, is still inhabited, it needs a lot of attention. When the members of the society who were managing the Hall abandoned the place, it was taken over by the Evacuee Property Board, which looks after it. The place houses a technical institute and a coaching centre. After Independence the hall is said to have been used as a drama theatre, then as a 'sugar refinery' and a rice godown.

It was in 1892 that the first of the political public meetings was held in Lahore. Six years earlier, Allen Octavian Hume, a Scotsman, who had retired from the Indian Civil Service, had set up the Indian National Congress for the ostensible purpose of Indian political regeneration. The meeting was organised by the Congress and was presided over by Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsee gentleman residing in England and a Member of Parliament for Central Finsbury.

The Congress held its meetings again in Lahore in 1900, 1919 and 1929. The last meeting was held under the president-ship of Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru and it was in that meeting that the Congress changed its hitherto stand of co-operation to that of complete Independence of India. In the same meeting, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Red Shirts offered their collaboration to the Congress.

There were other parties too, who selected Lahore for their annual meetings. For instance, the Jamiat-e-Ulam-e-Hind held their Jalsa in 1921, with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in the chair and again in 1942 under the presidentship of Maulana Hasan Ahmad Madani. The Khilafat Committee met here in 1929 under the president-ship of Maulana Muhammad Ali.

Nevertheless, the most important public meeting that was ever held in Lahore was in March 1940, when the Lahore Resolution was adopted. The meeting was presided over by the Quaid-e-Azam. It is worth noting that the first-ever public meeting of the Muslim League in Lahore, too, was presided over by the Quaid-e-Azam, in 1924.



Bradlaugh Hall

Outside Mochi Darwaaza