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The ice pits of Lahore

By Majid Sheikh

NAMES speak so much about the history of people, their mode of production, and the very land itself. The walled city and its environs have fascinating names, each a story unto itself. Names describe professions and pastimes. One such name that always intrigued me I heard from my younger brother, who spent most of his waking hours playing football in the grounds of the Central Training College, just outside Bhati Gate.

In the 1970s we used to live in the Rattigan Road area, once considered a posh locality just outside the old walled city. In the place where today stands the Central Training College just behind the Central Model School, was the residence of Sir William Rattigan, and it might come as a surprise to many that he and his family lived in an old style bungalow with a genuine thatched roof, all very "old English". One description of the house compares it to typical Suffolk thatched cottages. The house had the nameplate "Roselands". It was an imposing residence by any standard. The people of Lahore used to call this area "Rattigan Sahib ki Kothi".

Another description terms it "Rattigan Sahib ki Bhooswali Kothi". Later the British formally named it Rattigan Road. This was the house where the first Punjabi regiment formed by the British, the First Punjab Volunteers, was formed. This regiment was to play an important role in the 1857 uprising.

For those not familiar with Rattigan Road, suffice it to say that till just 40 years ago it housed the Parsi Temple, the house of the Syed family of Syed Babar Ali and the Jhang Syeds, the Khwaja family, the Abbasi family of doctors, the massive six-acre house of Col. Ata, the Sheikhs and other city influentials. Almost 100 years ago, it was definitely the most sought after area of Lahore. But even before Rattigan arrived and built his thatched house, the people of Lahore used to call this area "Purana Baraf Khana". My brother informs me that the older people still call this area "Baraf Maidan".

In the days of the Mughals and the Sikhs, this open area was called "Baraf Maidan". When the British came in 1849, they for the first time formally marked this

area out in maps as "Ice Pits". In these pits, in a virtual pre-historic manner, ice was 'manufactured' in winter and stored underground. In summer it was distributed early in the morning. One description of this activity says: "The big plain was divided into smaller plots or 'kiaris', on which a layer of rice straw was spread. On this straw were arranged a number of shallow pans of burnt clay, all of them containing water. The pits were lined with thick layers of straw and were surrounded by low burnt brick walls. On this wall rested a very thick straw roof, known as a 'chappar'.

"Between the walls and the edges of the pits ran narrow passages which enabled the carriers of ice burrows to distribute their daily loads at different points. At the bottom of each pit were men equipped with rakes and rammers who levelled the ice and consolidated it. The entrances of these pits were always carefully walled up after receiving its full load of ice."

To man these ice pits and to care for them, a large number of poor families formed a sort of 'katchi abadi' just to the east of

the shrine of Data Sahib. In these houses now dwell mostly Pathans who have settled in Lahore, and to the farther side is the famous colony of the "Eunuch Tribe" as they like to call themselves. People of Rattigan Road and Mohni Road have always called this place "Neutral Zone". In this colony lives the 'selected' king of the eunuchs of Lahore. But that is another story.

The ice pit families were each allotted a number of pits. It was their duty to place clean boiled water in these shallow earthen vessels, to collect the frozen ice and to take them to the pits that led fairly deeply into the ground. Each family then had to, by the time summer came, collect a given amount of ice, so that it lasted well into the summer. In this manner the people of Lahore were supplied ice from the Rattigan Road "Baraf Maidan".

The British also started another ice pit centre in the newly-constructed Central Jail on Jail Road. The entire Shah Jamal and Shadman area constituted the old central jail. Here a new series of pits were made, which supplied the cantonment and the British

army with ice in summer. As the quality of water of this area was considered superior to that of the Rattigan Road, the "jailwali baraf" was slightly more expensive than the "Rattigan Roadwali baraf". During the several cholera epidemics that hit Lahore in those days, the European population used only "jailwali baraf". At the height of the epidemics special permits were issued to Europeans for this ice.

These virtually pre-historic technology ice pits died after the first electricity powered ice manufacturing unit sprung up in 1879 on Rattigan Road. For the first time ice was available all the year round in large quantities. This led to the common people also enjoying kulfi in summer, a delicacy that formerly only the rich enjoyed. But though the ice pits of Lahore died away in the late 1800s, a few old-timers even now call the grounds where they existed, as the 'baraf maidan'. One assumes that in a few years even this name will die. Today there exists a swimming pool and some very old banyan trees. In our youth we spent many an evening discussing poetry there, not to speak of several unmentionable pastimes.