

# The sacred ground 13.3.04 of the sahibs Lahore Dawn

IF EVER the British left behind a part of their countryside, it was in the shape of the Lahore Gymkhana cricket ground in the Lawrence Gardens, or Jinnah Gardens. My father used to tell me that it reminded him of the Worcester cricket ground, probably the most beautiful in Britain, with The Hove in Sussex being a close second.

One of my favourite pastimes on a spring Sunday is to take my tea and sandwiches to watch cricket at this virtual temple of serenity. The old eyes cannot make out the fine cuts or glances without binoculars, but one can, after honing my senses in the Minto Park of old, judge the measure of the man at the wicket. My late father had seen Don Bradman play his last innings for a duck and one never tired of listening to the excitement of the tragic event. He missed his average of 100. Finally, it was proven that he was mortal.

But then so is Tendulkar, at least my think he is. It is sad that Tendulkar will not play at the Lahore Gymkhana cricket ground, for little does he know that he will be missing an experience that might make him love Lahore. Nehru called it the cultural capital, the "real heart", of the sub-continent. Bhagat Singh lived out his immortal act here. Yet in the turmoil of history, one that goes back in antiquity, did finally emerge a game that the people of the entire sub-continent learned to love, more so in Lahore than anywhere else.

The Lawrence Gardens were created after the turmoil of 1857 was over. The "desolate land" is where the British forces camped and finally overcame "our disorganized ancestors" against great odds. In the disorder, in these gardens, was born the famous Club Sandwich. In an area covering 112 acres were organized the gardens. The vow of the East India Company was that it would bring 80,000 saplings of 600 different species from every corner

of the world, where in those days, the sun never set. After collecting money from the sale of Badami Bagh, the Soldier's Bazaar at Anarkali and from a grant by the "Company Bahadur", was purchased the land where today stands the cricket grounds of the Lahore Gymkhana Club. This was the year 1860.

To start things off, a top gardener from Kew Gardens in London was shipped over and he began to train the local gardeners — 'malis' — and set about laying "the most beautiful gardens in the Punjab and Upper India". The Government College, Lahore, took over a major portion of the place to set up a botanical garden. The very first tree was planted by a beautiful young daughter of the commissioner of Lahore, Mr. Forsyth, on a crisp January morning in 1862. So thanks to the young Miss Forsyth began Lahore's most beautiful tradition. She was later to become Mrs George Parker, who was to build the first house on the Racecourse Road. She died in Lahore and is buried at the cemetery on Jail Road. The garden was fed water from the Lahore canal. The three main gates were called Victoria Gate (on The Mall), Rivaz Gate (on Lawrence Road), and Montgomery Gate (on Racecourse Road). Today they remain nameless.

In the middle of the Lawrence Gardens was built the Lawrence Hall, designed by the chief engineer, Mr. G. Stone, and built in 1861-2. It was here that the Lahore Gymkhana Club was housed. I remember in my youth using the club and signing the 'chits' with relish. With my brothers we once ran up a monthly bill exceeding Rs2,000. What followed one cannot describe. The old waiters used to keep us in check, short of looking behind our ears to make sure we had had a bath.

But the pride of place in the entire garden must surely go to the cricket ground. The expert

from Kew Gardens did a splendid job, for he laid out a turf the equal of which has not been found in the country. So true is the flatness, almost as if one could play a game of billiard on it. The pitch is another story. One legend has it that the entire mud was brought over from Worcester, and for one whole year it was cured and rolled and "not a lice was allowed to crawl on it". The result has been an exceptionally true wicket, with a "true bounce".

But to suit the beautiful trees that surround the ground and the lush green turf, is the exquisite pavilion, made from British oak. Many years later the cricket-crazy prime minister Nawaz Sharif got another one made of brick and cement, a sign of our times.

The first major match played here was in 1911 between the British Army and a World XI. The World XI comprised players from Gloucestershire and Lancashire, while the army team was drawn from the 87th Punjabis, 17th Lancasters, 15th Sikhs and the King's Regiment. The World XI team won by 61 runs. The match had its desired effect and a strong team led by D R Jardine played here in the 1930s. It was followed by a Jack Ryder-led team that included 'Governor-General' Charlie Macartney in which Ryder, a former Test cricketer, hooked Muhammad Nisar, then one of the fastest bowlers of the world, at will. Lahore did not take well to their very own Nisar "Gooli" being hooked. The seeds of competition had been sown.

Pakistan's first 'unofficial' Test against the West Indies was played on this ground from Nov 27 to 30, 1948, resulting in a draw. The Lahore Gymkhana cricket ground is where the very first 'official' Test between India and Pakistan on Pakistani soil was played from Jan 29 to Feb 1, 1955, making it the 35th Test ground in the world. The result was a draw. — MAJID SHEIKH