

The 'staging bungalow' with a history

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IN the beginning, on the mound outside the old walled city of Lahore, there was a staging bungalow, from where stagecoaches would leave for other cities. In even older times it was a staging area where troops would train and then leave for battle. Today many a career takes off, and, hopefully, will do so in the centuries to come.

In the days when Maharajah Ranjit Singh reigned supreme (1799-1839), on the mound where today stands the Government College, Lahore, there was a military training center. Just next to the mound, where the troops of the elite 'Fauj-e-Khaas' trained, was the staging area. On the mound was built a bungalow, which was, as the records of the Sikh-era show, called the 'staging bungalow'. An 1867 map of Lahore confirms this fact. On the left was a chapel that was latter to be incorporated into the college as a Gymnasium; a derelict building that today needs considerable funds to convert it into a 'Government College Museum'. But more of that latter.

According to a well-known writer on Lahore, Latif, the first classes of the King Edward Medical College, Lahore, were held in 1860 in this staging bungalow, while the hospital was established in the stables of Raja Suchet Singh's 'haveli' in the main Tibbi Bazaar near the Taxali Gate. When the British for "military reasons" demolished the beautiful Taxali Gate, this hospital was also lost. But by then it had moved to the present Mayo Hospital.

In 1856 the East India Company approved the establishment of a Central College in Lahore. Towards this end the Punjab's Director of Public Instruction entered into "correspondence" with the Dean of Carlisle and with the Rev. G.E.L. Cotton, the Headmaster of Marlborough School, England, "with the view of selecting two suitable graduates from Home for appointment as Principal and 'Physical Tutor of Natural Philosophy'. A 'handsome' salary of Rs. 600 and Rs. 400 was offered.

The 'handsome prospects' did not attract the correct candidates, and so the East India Company decided to constitute a board comprising Rev. Cotton, Rev. A.P. Stanley, Canon of Canterbury, and Mr. T. Walround, Fellow of Balliol, Oxford, who suggested that only graduates from Cambridge, Oxford, Dublin or Durham should be considered as this would be a "prestige posting". So from the very beginning Government College, Lahore, was, and is still,

considered to be a very special institution, or at least it has so proved as the years pass. It was then considered that for excellence in philosophy, a Professor of Mathematics was essential. The Lt. Governor of the Punjab, Sir John Lawrence, who considered it premature, rejected this proposal. In these circumstances the board selected Dr. G.W. Leitner, as the very first Principal of Government College, Lahore.

You might be wondering as to just what happened to the Central College, Lahore, proposal. That also saw the light of day, only it was called the Central Training College, Lahore, built just opposite the Government College, Lahore, and next to the Central Model School, Lahore, which was built in 1883. This set of school and teacher training college also proved to be a 'centre of excellence', much that they are ignored today.

The original Government College, Lahore, opened in the spacious 'haveli' of Dhian Singh inside Taxali Gate on the First of January, 1864. The present building, a Gothic masterpiece of W. Purdon, the Superintending Engineer of Lahore, was started in 1870. It took five years, to complete costing Rs. 320,537/-. The construction was undertaken by Rai Bahadar Kanhaiya Lal, a genius and dedicated builder who has written a marvelous book on Lahore, not to speak of building almost all the well-known building of that era. Over the years various blocks have been added to this college. It has a huge Botanical Garden next to the Lawrence Gardens (now called Jinnah Gardens), it has an Atomic Physics Laboratory opposite the Civil Secretariat, next to which it has its own cricket ground.

An important portion of the college is its hostels, of which it has two. One is the Quadrangle (now called the Iqbal Hostel), which is inside the college premises and is meant for Intermediate students. The other is the original Government College Boarding House, which was later named the New Hostel. In one description of this hostel, a Punjab Gazetteer places its location as being "next to the house of Mr. H. Brandon, Pleader, and the Punjab Association Club". No trace of the 'pleader' remains, though in our school days I do remember my late father mentioning "Khoona pleader", an Anglo-Indian lawyer who lived next to the hostel. For that matter to the north of

Government College was the DAV School, which is today called the Government Muslim Model High School.

But then Lahore is not all about building and history. Its people have always been more important than the institutions that it has. The Principals of Government College, Lahore, have all been 'great' men so to say. Starting from Leitner, the great names just do not cease. There was Garrett, Dunncliff, Sondhi, Bokhari, Nazir, Rashid and now Dr. Khalid Aftab, just to name a few. Each educationalist was outstanding in his own right. In the post-Independence era Patras Bokhari definitely stands out, as does the great Dr. Nazir, Prof Rashid, Dr Ajmal and Dr. Khalid Aftab. Their mark on the finest educational institution of Pakistan definitely remains. As a student I remember Dr Ajmal immensely. I once asked him why he wrote only 'Muhammad Ajmal' on his board and not Dr. Ajmal. He smiled, rolled his cigarette and in a shy dragging style said: "Otherwise people start showing me their pulse".

But then so have been the students. Name any discipline and the list of names of its illustrious students is mind-boggling. The poets Iqbal and Faiz stand out. Among scientists there is the Nobel laureate Dr Salam. In zoology there was the Nobel nominee Dr Ahsanul Islam whom my father always called "aandawala doctor" — the 'Egg Doctor'. He determined the cell formation of embryos, a lead that was to take others to discover just how genes and DNA function. He was the man who unlocked "the secret of life". I knew him well and was very fond of him. Whenever I asked him about his life work, he would remark: "Allah ka kamal hai". Many feel that by coming back from Imperial College, England, he gave up his Nobel nomination. But his sick mother was more important to him.

Such have been the great teachers and students of Government College, Lahore. Today it has managed to achieve the status of a university. As it meanders its way to new heights, we return to the question of the museum in the making. One assumed some old Ravian would one day leave a fortune for this project. Maybe we forget what Bilal the Slave from the Holy Prophet (pbuh) learnt: "A drop of a scholar's ink is more sacred than a martyr's blood". — **MAJID SHEKH**