

The creeping slums of Lahore

EVERY time we visit our old house in the once posh Rattigan Road, cushioned between the College of Animal Husbandry, the district courts and the Central Model School, it pains one to see how a once magnificent and posh living area has been transformed into a slum. In this transformation there is a lesson for Lahore.

The idea of writing this piece is not to deviate from recollecting what once was, but to put forward the proposition that like the once magnificent Rattigan Road, other more recent "posh" residential areas like Gulberg, and even Model Town, seem destined to becoming slums. We are writing history today in a way that it should not be written. It makes sense that we be proactive, and not let history be a dead subject. The 'creeping slum' effect that Lahore is subject to can be easily seen in a place like Samanabad. Even Krishan Nagar, built with so much pride by the rich

Hindu merchants of Lahore, has become a slum of sorts. Today, ironically, it is called Islampura. The total failure of the local government to implement the basic laws that surround 'decent and reasonable' living are at the bottom of the creeping slums of Lahore.

When Model Town was built, it was promised that it would be a purely residential area with no plot being less than two kanals. Today the limit has been lowered to one kanal, and people have even built five and ten marla portions, all part of the fragmentation that is allowed. The failure of the local government and the failure of the judicial system to protect it from predators — democratic, bureaucratic and military — has seen grassroots democracy fail.

The end result today are creeping slums. The failure of democracy at a higher level, not than any level is higher than local, has seen all state institutions that protect citizens from injus-

tice fail and become meaningless. That is why it is important to study just how whole residential areas have become 'living hell', as one researcher has put it.

When Zafarul Ahsan built Gulberg, he promised the residents that it would remain a "peaceful residential colony" where commercial enterprise would be regulated and never allowed to overrun the colony. Today commercialization is running wide in almost every lane and street. But then so have all lofty promises made to each and every residential colony been broken. The inability of "law and order" to rule and reign has resulted in Lahore becoming a 'creeping slum', and there seems no way it can be controlled from the greed of those in power.

But let us look at our example of Rattigan Road, and the way it has evolved. In the Mughal days it was a nice open space with the area just to the east of the shrine of Data Ganj

Bakhsh being where the ice pits of Lahore existed. When the Sikhs came, they built small houses and military barracks. The British converted this into a posh colony. Just behind the Central Model School, where today stands the Central Training College, was the residence of Sir William Rattigan.

He 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.

It remained an important residential area till the 1930s, when the rich aristocratic families of Lahore began to replace the British. Even today if you walk through the winding lanes of Tap Road, just next to Rattigan Road, you will see the grandiose of the once posh area. In the 1950s and 60s, it was even then a very reasonable area. But then came to today breakdown of the local government in the shape of Basic Democrats of Gen Ayub Khan. Then came an array of 'non-party' local government persons with the latest version being 'nazims' and 'naib nazims', all persons, as events now tell us, more interested in the commercialization of private living.

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shaking the very foundations of some very old houses. Where once lived the elite, today slums exist, with no improvement in the sanitation or water supply. Where once 100 people lived, today live over 11,500. This is what happens where planning is abandoned and the law is lax.

The tragic condition of Rattigan Road can be seen today in the fast changing world of Model Town and Gulberg. Residents on the Main Gulberg Boulevard complain that they will not be able to withstand the brute force of commercialization. Why did such a situation come about, and what can be done to stop commercial intrusion into residential living. For the time being, the local government chief of Lahore is known to be interested in such activities himself. It is only when the people of Lahore rise up and force the government to let the law of the land be felt, that Lahore will cease to be the 'creeping slum' that it is becoming. — **MAJID SHEIKH**