

The Last Builder of Delhi

He wanted to build a hospice for relatives of patients. It took his sons 27 years to make it a reality.

BY SHEILA REDDY

IT'S unlike any dharamshala you've ever seen—a sleek steel and white Room Khosla-designed structure with 98 gleaming steel-coated “beds” that look more like seats in a lounge bar than some place for weary pilgrims to rest their heads. With desert coolers, a restaurant and even laundry facilities, this newly built hospice adjoining the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital is easily the most sophisticated building in East Delhi. But then what do you expect when it's a memorial to the builder of New Delhi, one of its richest citizens, Sir Sobha Singh.

The self-made builder who bagged a lion's share of the contract to build Lutyen's Delhi, including Rashtrapati Bhawan, South and North Block and India Gate, died with one unfulfilled dream, according to his sons, Khushwant Singh and Brigadier Gurbaksh Singh. “He used to see the plight of patients’ relatives outside ANMS—they had to sleep on the pavements because there was nowhere to stay near the hospital, and wished he could build a dharamshala for them,” recalls Gurbaksh. But even builders as famously rich as Sir Sobha—be owned half of Connaught Place at one time—can't always have, or give away, what they want. “Each time he approached the Delhi government with his proposal, they smelt a rat,” says Gurbaksh. “They probably suspected he would grab the land, and no matter how many times he assured them that the building would be handed over to the hospital management, once completed, there were still delays and reversals. After trying two or three times, he gave up.”

But when he died in 1978, his dream dharamshala unbuilt, he perhaps hoped his three sons would accomplish what he couldn't. That's why, points out Gurbaksh, he donated his home—



Khushwant and Gurbaksh Singh outside the hospice their father, Sir Sobha Singh, dreamt of

1A, Janpath, the first bungalow to be constructed on Delhi's first avenue—several shops on both sides of Ajmeri Gate, besides property in Shimla and Bhopal to set up a charitable trust.

The sons had no better luck with the dream dharamshala. “They told us to give the money to them, but we didn't want to do that.” In despair over how to spend the Rs 2 crore-a-year accumulating in the trust, they settled for a charitable school instead. “But even this did not materialise. After we paid the earnest money to the government for some land, they retracted and it took several years for us even to get back our advance,” he says.

That's when Sir Sobha's sons decided it was better to give to private institutions rather than trying to force the government to accept their charity. They built a block in Pingsalwara, another at a Missionaries of Charity hospital and a wing in an institution for the mentally challenged. “But we knew that my father wouldn't have been happy

unless we built his dream project.”

Three years ago, the project was suddenly revived thanks to Delhi chief minister Sheila Dixit: she allotted the trust some land inside the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital to build the long-hoped-for dharamshala. But even with such powerful friends like Dixit on their side, it took the combined efforts of Delhi's two eminence grises to get the project going. “My role,” says Khushwant Singh, “was to sign cheques and occasionally bully the chief minister and her health minister.”

It was touch and go for almost three years. Gurbaksh recalls with a shudder the red tape, the many fruitless visits to government offices to get the plans approved, sanctions for electricity and plumbing connections.... But with the building finally completed and handed over to the hospital on March 5, 2005—Sir Sobha's birth anniversary, his valiant sons are ready for more. “We've asked the chief minister to let us know if we can take up similar projects. Our only condition is that it has to be in Delhi. It won't be easy. But, “this is the city he grew up and flourished in, and this is the city he would want to give back to.” Give till it hurts, as they say.

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Despite powerful friends, the red tape and the fruitless rounds of government offices continued ceaseless. It was touch and go for almost three years.