

Nek Chand – A self-made world-class artist



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I felt sorry when I read the [news](#) that Nek Chand died at the ripe old age of 90.

In 1962, I was posted in Chandigarh as the Assistant Garrison Engineer, Army. A unit of the Indian Air Force had been inducted into what was essentially a small civil aerodrome, mainly to accommodate new AN12 transport planes, which had been given the task of ferrying by air the supplies required by troops in the Ladakh area. An army unit was being raised step by step to collect materials required by the units, pack them carefully, load the planes as per the day's indent, receive them back if the supply could not be delivered due to weather, store and despatch later. There were perishable and non-perishable items. In addition the aircrafts had to be loaded very early morning. Our job was to create accommodation for this unit.

At that time, Chandigarh did not have a cantonment, and Army personnel lived in different parts of the city. Chandigarh had only 24 sectors, of which sectors 22, 23, and 21 were the most developed. Chandigarh also had an Industrial layout towards the Railway station. Most other sectors were in various stages of development.

Chandigarh's population would have been a lakh or so. The culture that was being promoted was alien to *Punjabiya* (Punjabi way of life). Many Punjabis loved drinking milk, lassi and they wanted either to rear a buffaloes in the back yard or get the buffaloes milked before them. Chandigarh did not allow this. Milk used to come from Ambala and Amritsar. Punjabi womenfolk would have loved to make atta dough at home, and take it to a road corner tandoor to get baked rotis and naans – but such tandoors were not allowed. Shops on footpath and handcarts were not encouraged; maybe the rules did not permit them. All houses faced inwards, and none faced the main roads, though the Punjabis of those days were extroverted people, who loved street facing homes. There were very few *Dhabas*. Fast trains came in dead of the night. The cost of living was high. There were only a few Clubs.

I rented a house in sector 7, not far from Sukhna Choe and Sukhna Lake. Sukhna was a small stream descending from the foot hills of Shivalik range and joining River Ghaggar a few km away. Sukhna Lake, was created by the authority by damming the stream. It lay in the northern end of the town. The high court, secretariat and legislature were immediately south of the lake. So also sectors containing bungalows of ministers and high-ranking officers. Chandigarh was planned as a rectangle divided into sectors in grid pattern. Sector 1 housed the three wings of Government mentioned above. Then, in each row, there were five sectors.

Sector 7 was next in the grid and was mostly an under-developed open area, slowly filling in. There were rows of quarters for middle level Government servants, a neighbourhood shopping centre, some private houses, a few others in various stages of construction, and heaps of building

materials here and there. There was also a vast open space waiting to be developed as a play field. The attraction for me was that it was the closest to Sukhna Lake and comparatively open, and housed mid-level officers and academicians. Further down were the sectors housing subordinate Government servants and general public as also the city's bus station.

I was 28 years old. Our family consisted of my wife, my son, and me. We used to go to Sukhna Lake whenever time permitted. Being a South Indian, I had very few friends in the mainly North Indian town. There were three cinema houses, but they were far off. So also a few *Dhabas* and restaurants mostly in sector 22. The Army mess was in a hired building but in another sector. The new town was still struggling to establish; it was mainly a *babus'* (government officers) settlement.

For me, a person from Mysore, and recently transferred from Shimla, the summer heat was unbearable. Hence, in summer, we liked to walk on the bund of Sukhna Lake. The evening breeze blowing in from the Shivalik hills on the farther side of the lake was a great attraction. In the lake itself, rowing and boating sports were still embryonic. For our son, a great outing was the vast expanse of water and wide tank bund with only walkers. He would explore the surrounding area, especially the rocky outcrop with some undergrowth towards eastern revetment.

It was there, in one corner of the bund, a little away in a gorge, amidst rock outcrops and under growth that we found Nek Chand, quietly immersed in working on his dream. His bicycle rested on a nearby slope. His raw materials were discarded household materials and construction debris, crockery pieces, stones, bricks, insulators, and pebbles of all sizes from pea size to 18 inch. Both Sukhna Choe and Ghaggar River towards Panchkoola had plenty of rounded boulders; discerning eyes would see that they were of different hues.

Nek Chand's work area was small, perhaps an acre. He had just started, maybe a few years ago. He was a road inspector in the Punjab Public Works Department, and this was his hobby. He spent his spare time here. Oblivious of the small gathering that would watch him, squatting and bending down, he would carry on with his work. He would fix a boulder here, chip some earth there, and make a small pedestal of cement, and fix a nose on a face, and paste a bangle piece on a hand, or something else that came to him.

Mind you, there were no special glues in those days. But he had experimented and had prepared his own concoctions. In Mysore, our villages have figures of clay of minor Gods and Goddesses at the entrance, which are rustic, but with large eyes, strange ornaments and jewellery, may be out of proportions, but they had their own appeal. Accustomed to that, I found charm in his creation. I liked his work but I was not bowled over. The work area was small and there were no water bodies. It had not acquired scale.

To me, he appeared a deviant. Perhaps most people of those days also thought so. For our son, Nek Chand's creations were a great attraction. He would make yelping sounds, and run towards the figures. It was perhaps so for other children also. The visitors were mostly parents with children.

Nek Chand was reserved with older people, and would answer any question by a grunt or a sharp word. But with our son, he was different. He would answer our son's innumerable questions patiently, giving names to the human figures he was creating. When my son lost interest and started picking up stones and throwing them, Nek Chand would curtly tell me to take him away.

Some write-ups about Nek Chand's rock garden say that the work went unnoticed for a long time – up to 1971 or so. I do not believe this. This I speak with my own experience with something as small as public sign boards. Some of our higher offices had moved into a sector. I was asked to put up a sign board. As is the habit with us, we fixed a board road side at one entrance to the sector. and one at the turning into inner road without bothering about approvals. I was called by the planning authority, made to remove the sign boards, write for permission: make sign boards as per their design and fix them as per their direction. In short, the authorities were very fussy about the look even small public items. Sukhna Lake was one of the prominent places frequented by the people of Chandigarh. It is hard to believe that people in authority were unaware of Nek Chand and his work.

For some time, Nek Chand's work proceeded as he wanted. But suddenly, his work stopped for some time in mid-1963. We came to know that the authorities had objected. After a month or so, Nek Chand's work resumed. It was rumoured that Dr. Randhawa, a high ranking and highly regarded civil servant and lover of nature, gardens and arts had talked to Nek Chand and perhaps then spoken to Pierre Jeanneret, the Resident French architect, E N Mangat Rai, the then Chief Secretary, and others. It was likely that authorities decided to turn a blind eye to Nek Chand's work, as it did not disturb their plans. As Dr. Randhawa was a connoisseur of art, landscapes, and folk arts, I believe it.

We were in Chandigarh nearly four years. We used to frequent Nek Chand's rock garden, and take our visitors from South India there.

After I was transferred out of Chandigarh, I went there only when my son went to Chandigarh's Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research for his medical degrees. On these visits, I made it a point to visit Nek Chand's rock garden, which had by then gained worldwide fame, and had become a "must see" tourist attraction. It had expanded in leaps and bounds; I saw more and more people working there. Water bodies and artificial falls had enhanced its beauty. Nek Chand had got honours and titles from all over the world, including from Government of India. I learnt that he had become a consultant to others who wanted to replicate it elsewhere.

Great man. Pursued his dream meticulously. He gave a new meaning to broken and discarded materials, and that itself has now become a new discipline in art and architecture. I feel glad to have had a nodding acquaintance with him when he was not yet famous. ❖

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