

By Sidharth Mishra



To those who follow Indian history, a medieval structure in the heart of Delhi making news headlines may sound queer. If not queer, certainly nauseating that an important fort city should make the news for corruption eight centuries after it was built. Before we get into the details of the current controversy surrounding the building of the modern cricket stadium at Feroze Shah Kotla, it would not be out of place to delve into its hoary past. As we move north from Purana Qila on the Ring Road and approach the Raj Ghat complex, on the left hand are the remnants of the fort city built by Feroze Shah Tughlaq, the last important Sultan of Delhi from the Tughlaq dynasty, ruling from 1351 to 1388. Feroze Shah came to power after the tumultuous regime of Mohammed Bin Tughlaq, who was known to be both eccentric and extraordinarily talented.

Feroze Shah Tughlaq became the first Sultan of Delhi to shift the seat of power from South Delhi to the North of Raisina Hills. Before him, the Sultans ruled the city from fort cities of Mehrauli, Siri and Jahanpanah. Kotla Feroze Shah became the first settlement of the Muslim rulers of Delhi on the banks of Yamuna.

The building of the new capital was the highlight of Feroze Shah's reign. Two centuries later Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built the city of Shahjahanabad and Red Fort on the foundations of Kotla Feroze Shah. Feroze Shah is credited with bringing the two Ashokan pillars, one from Topara in Ambala district and Meerut to Delhi.

One of the Ashokan pillars still stands today at his palace inside the Feroz Shah Kotla complex. Feroze Shah is also credited with the rehabilitation the Qutb Minar, which was struck by lightning in 1368, knocking off its top storey. Tughlaq replaced them with the existing two floors, faced with red sandstone and white marble. One of his Shikargah (hunting lodge) known as Kushak Mahal is situated within the House complex. The Kushak Road in Lutyens' Delhi is named after this fort.

Kotla of Feroze Shah

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Feroze Shah Kotla was virtually abandoned as the later rulers built another fort city, which today houses the Lodhi Garden. With the coming of the Mughals, Delhi too had lost its pre-eminent stature before Shah Jahan brought lustre back to the city.

During the interregnum of Sher Shah Suri, another fort city was built on the banks of the Yamuna, which is known today as Old Fort. No wonder Kotla turned into ruins as in the centuries that followed, much of the structure and buildings it housed were destroyed as successive rulers dismantled them and reused the material in the structures they built. Kotla remained that way for many centuries till the British decided to build a cricket ground here.

We will come to the cricket still later, as the ruins too had their romance with history. The most prominent was the venue of the first meeting between Punjab revolutionary Bhagat Singh and the leader of the militant movement from United Provinces Chandrashekhar Azad. This reunion brought together the various militant factions and Ram Prasad Bismil's Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) under the banner of Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA).

Bismil and his associates Ashfaqullah Khan, Roshan Singh and Rajendra Lahiri were hanged in December 1927 in the Kakori Train Robbery case and the militant movement against the British rule was floundering. This made Azad take the initiative of contacting groups in Punjab. On August 7-8, 1928, leaders including Azad, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivram Rajguru came together to revive the militant movement and from this emerged the HSRA.

In the next few years, HSRA cadres left behind a trailblazing legacy, assassinating Lahore's police official JP Saunders to avenge the death of Congress veteran Lala Lajpat Rai. The Congress leader in 1928 had come out of retirement to lead protests against the colonialist Simon Commission. Rai died of fatal injuries received during a cane charge. Justifying their violent agitation, the HSRA also came out with a manifesto titled 'Philosophy of Bomb'.

By 1931, the movement dissipated with the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev in the Lahore conspiracy case on March 23. Earlier on February 27, 1931, Chandrasekhar Azad shot himself during a gunfight with the police in the famous Alfred Park incident at Allahabad. After Azad's death, there was no central leader to unite the revolutionaries and regional differences increased. Today a memorial park stands at the place where the HSRA was born.

Coming to cricket, in the 1930s, the British started to build the capital city of New Delhi. As they built the city, the British also scouted for a ground for the imperial sport of cricket. Till then the cricket hub of the city was at colonial Roshanara Club in North Delhi. Thus, at the ruins of the Feroze Shah Kotla, just beyond Delhi Gate of the Walled City was built Willingdon Pavilion, where the offices of the Delhi and District Cricket Association (DDCA) shifted base.

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However, the first test match on this ground was held only after Independence in 1948-49, against John Goddard-led West Indies team. Kotla's wicket has been happy hunting ground for Indian icons like Bishan Singh Bedi, S Venkatraghvan, Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar and off course Anil Kumble. Your reporter has witnessed Kumble scalping all ten Pakistani wickets in 1999 at Feroze Shah Kotla.

The stadium and ground then wore a Spartan look. Today the ground is home to a mega arena, which has also invited an equally huge controversy involving cricket enthusiast and country's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. History indeed is still being written at the Kotla.

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