

There is an urgent need to rethink the role of the Lahore Arts Council on the whole, and if the first step is to limit its autonomy then it is a step in the wrong direction

By Sarwat Ali

These days a series of meetings are being held to determine the exact status and role of Lahore Arts Council, Alhamra. It is being debated whether the autonomy granted to it be given a legal cover, or that as of yore, be scrapped and it made a part of Punjab Arts Council to serve as one of its divisional councils.

The argument advanced by those opposing autonomy is that it will hamper the execution of a coordinated cultural policy of the government as against a centralised system which ensures a more prompt and efficient implementation. But if a cultural policy means staging variety shows on occasions like national days or on dinners for visiting dignitaries as unfortunately these councils have been reduced to do then the original agenda has been pushed into oblivion.

It may serve as an important reminder here that these arts councils were not formed to promote and implement government policies but were supposed to be institutions for the promotion of the arts. The two do not necessarily run on the same course. Arts councils were supposed to serve as a platform where artistic expression could thrive without the fear and irritation of interference, either by the government or any other pressure group.

Even otherwise the role of the divisional councils have been



institution

Who runs the show?

far from satisfactory. These have been bedeviled by lack of proper vision and scarcity of resources. At places these arts councils do not even have proper premises and have survived in makeshift venues for decades. At best, these have been recruiting agencies where a number of persons have found employment.

It is unfortunate that the fate of state institutions depends so largely on the views and workings of individuals who run them. Part of this can be attributed to the lack of long-term planning. The change at the top totally exposes the institution to a series of changes both in the vision and working — giving a free-hand to the boss to play around. If he is sensible then the institution benefits from the changes, but if he is only biding time for a better posting then it does not bode well for it at all.

Alhamra has been one such

organisation that has suffered due to the whims of its bosses, because there has never been any clear goal for the organisation to achieve, and it has been tossed around in an open field where the goalposts have continued to shift. Should it be funded totally by the government for the promotion of the arts or should it compromise half way and raise its own funding by renting out its premises? There has been an endemic debate within the corridors of its establishment.

It was decided a few years ago that the cause of the arts would be better served if Alhamra, that is Lahore Arts Council, was granted an autonomous status within the government. And so it was done. A governing body was also constituted. But then as the persons responsible for the great change in the status of Alhamra left

abruptly, the steam went out of the whole scheme. The governing body lingered on for a couple of years, without any constitutional cover and took decisions which were not worth the paper they were written on.

Lahore Arts Council came into being as a part of Punjab Arts Council which was formed under an act of parliament. Its status could only be changed by a subsequent act of parliament and the change that was brought about through an ordinance or an executive order required a constitutional cover. There being no parliament in the provinces or at the centre, the governing body that came into being as a result of autonomy was essentially an illegal entity and its decisions were always liable to be challenged in a court of law.

This is not to say that autonomy that was granted to the

Council was an act that was wrong or had been vitiated by intention. Only that it was not done properly and was left unfinished by the people who had brought about the change as they chose to leave the positions that they were occupying in the government. As the tenure of the governing body which already had an illegal status has come to an end, under what rule will the new one be formed is anybody's guess.

Similarly, of late, there was plenty of talk about the setting up of a performing arts academy — a project long overdue since the society has suffered immensely because of the absence of a proper institution for educating people in the various arts like film, music and theatre. It seemed that much progress was made in a short period, and what once appeared

a pipe-dream was now imminently achievable. But the recent change at the top has now again raised fears of it being put on the backburner.

It was an individual who was pushing the case and making it seem happen, but new priorities will overtake the ones enlisted. It will be such a pity if the performing arts academy is again put on the shelf to gather dust.

So many attempts have been made over the last 40 years, both at the centre and the provinces, regarding the setting up of the academy that to deny its significance would be closing the eyes to the inevitability of its usefulness. It will only be a tragic reflection on how our state institutions are managed and run if the idea is shelved just because of one individual.

The plans and projects should continue — irrespective of the

person in charge. But Alhamra has had a long history that betes this assumption. When the old Alhamra building, formally known as the Pakistan Arts Council was knocked down and then built according to the design of Nayyar Ali Dada, the whole project remained stalled for years till a couple of individuals took interest and the Hall was finally commissioned in 1981. It was primarily due to those gentlemen that Alhamra on The Mall was completed and the foundation of the Cultural Complex at the Gaddafi Stadium was laid.

The arts council's programmes too are planned on whims. If the boss happens to be more enlightened, he initiates Alhamra's own productions. We all know that a number of very good plays were produced by the Lahore Arts Council in the early 1990s. Similarly some good

plays were produced as part of the Horse and Cattle Shows at the Alhamra when the scope of the show was enlarged to include cultural activity as well. But then there have been times when the halls were liberally given out on rent and only profits brandished as trophies to adorn the balance sheet. Mercifully this policy discontinued as Alhamra has started to produce its own plays in the last few months.

Even then in the end it all boils down to the person running these establishments. Some have saved a little of the council from only becoming the *gunjan khanas* of the *shahenshahs* and allowed some breathing space for promotion of the arts. There is an urgent need to rethink the role of the arts councils on the whole, and if the first step is to limit their autonomy then it is a step in the wrong direction.

AA
The News
28.7.02