

Centered approach

Do we need an institute solely dedicated to Pakistan Studies?

Dr Musarrat Abid, the recently appointed administrator, believes the centre will soon be a hub of constructive intellectual activity to prove and justify its existence. During the last four months a number of steps have been taken; the library has been catalogued for the first time and new books have been added; a PhD thesis on life and works of Maulana Shabbir Ahmed Usmani is in the printing process; and another popular research work (Last Fifty Days of the Quaid) is being republished.

According to Dr Musarrat, the centre aims at keeping abreast with the changing international geo-political situation with respect to Pakistan and old facts and figures will not be dwelt upon as much as the emerging challenges to the country. The administration believes the best thing about the centre is that it is open for all and anyone interested in the subject or doing a relevant research or surveying a particular area of study about Pakistan can use the centre's infrastructure. There are more than 6500 books in the library, some of which are really rare, covering subjects from national issues to international current affairs. This collection is to be increased to at least 15000 books in a short time. A wide range of national and international periodicals have also been subscribed to by the centre.

There will also be expert guidance available shortly which will be able to guide the visitors in their particular fields of interest, maintains Dr Musarrat. Dr Musarrat herself has completed her PhD from Leeds University and

was one of the pioneering members of Bahauddin Zakria University, Multan. "A modern auditorium is also under construction to facilitate seminars and workshops. The good news at the centre is that all the books are available for anyone who cares to walk in but none of the books can be issued. Nevertheless, visitors can get the desired portion of a book photocopied at reasonable rates," she says.

According to Dr Musarrat, the main objective of the institute is to promote research on themes relating to history, politics, economics, foreign affairs, culture and languages of Pakistan. The centre is publishing a bi-annual research journal 'Pakistan Vision' while workshops, seminars and lectures on issues relating to Pakistan are also arranged regularly. Inquiries on relevant topics can also be made via e-mail. A recent seminar arranged by the centre received wide attention and attracted a sizable audience from educational circles. Iraq war and the changing world system was the topic and Professor Rasool Bakesha and Dr. Rafique Ahmad articulated liberally against US intentions. Students from different universities and colleges participated while PU

VC presided over the session. Students with diversified educational backgrounds such as economics, history, political science and sociology etc are encouraged to apply for the M Phil programme where masters in Pakistan Studies is an advantage but is not essential.

Ahmed Ijaz, a research fellow at the centre, claims the centre is trying to alter the image of Pakistan Studies. "Traditionally the subject has revolved solely around the Independence Movement i.e. history of Pakistan and some geographical jumble of figures about the country. At the masters and senior levels Pakistan Studies now means much more; the scope encompasses culture, literature and languages of Pakistan, political movements and parties of Pakistan, different systems of administration that have been put to test in Pakistan, a study of constitutional evolution, the role of the military, status of women and human rights in the society and a number of amazing facets that add new colours to the subject," he says.

A one year diploma in Sindhi, Balochi and Pushto is also being offered at the institute to promote inter-provincial harmony and to foster

local heritage. M Phil classes leading to PhD are also commenced in a couple of months. The centre is all too willing to carry out research on any challenging and worthwhile topic assigned to it by the government or the private sector. Syed Karim Haider, another research fellow at the institute, tells TNS that anyone with a research oriented task is welcome to visit and benefit from the facilities available at the institute.

It is a paradox that Pakistan Studies is offered as an elective subject at the graduation level at very few institutes of the country. It is quite a paradox that a subject that warrants a complete institute for its progress is not available to students at the graduation level to take it up as an elective subject like English. English is also a compulsory subject but can also be studied more thoroughly as an elective subject. Although the Higher Education Commission, formerly the University Grants Commission, has recommended the subject to be included as an elective subject, the main hindrance lies in scarcity of qualified teachers. This is a classical example of the vicious circle prevalent in Pakistan's educational sector.

There are few qualified teachers available therefore classes on elective basis cannot be started and since there is a dearth of learning opportunities, few individuals turn up as teachers.

Improperly qualified teachers bring more harm than good to the subject by portraying it as a dull, dogmatic and almost dead subject. Latin can be taught in a livelier manner than Pakistan Studies which is thrust upon students in most institutes as a subject with instructions: 'to be crammed only'. As a result the only attractive feature is that one can afford to be non-serious in the Pakistan Studies class or can miss the class altogether without much loss. How can an MBBS student learn the subject with zeal unless the teacher has a charismatic approach towards the topic?

One of the reasons this department had been dragging on its feet in the past was the dominant role of the South Asian Centre that has overseen its 'activity' since 1981. Under the recent setup Pakistan Study Centre has gained independence and is a sovereign centre of study in itself. With no one to share the part of blame now it ought to sense its responsibility.