

706 A women's platform

The Lahore Ladies Club was formed in 1938 for women who did not go to mixed parties. Now it is a club that provides both entertainment and useful information apart from conducting social work

By Ayesha Bhatti

Located on Lawrence Road close to the China Chowk, the Lahore Ladies Club seems to be a very quiet place. Situated on the boundary of Lawrence Gardens, an old white building with a spacious lawn, a wide stretch of the green park behind it, it gives the look of a typical building of British days in Lahore.

A lot of activity goes on in this building. There are almost 200 members who meet twice a month. The club makes sure to invite guests to speak on some topic of interest to women, which is generally very informative and useful.

Mrs. Iqbal Meraj is the president of the club. For the last many years, she, along with a 15-member managing body including two vice presidents, has been arranging various activities for women from the platform of this club.

The club has been hosting activities like social lunches, musical nights, religious gatherings, cooking classes and lots of

other things. Mrs. Meraj, who is a member of the club since before partition, recalls the history of the club.

"Lady Abdul Qadir, wife of a well-reputed barrister, Sir Abdul Qadir, established the club in 1938. She asked the wife of the governor of that time to allocate some place to the women who did not go to mixed parties. The demand was mainly for women from the middle class of that time. The first members of the club were wives of lawyers and doctors along with the wives of the maharajas and nawabs. The governor's wife managed to attain on lease a piece of land, covering an area of 2.75 acre of the Lawrence Gardens. Lady Abdul Qadir became the first president of this club.

"The land was allocated in 1938 but its members had started to hold meetings as early as in late 1920s in members' houses," says Mrs. Meraj. The club aims to provide entertainment and information to its members. Writers, journalists and social workers have been frequently invited as chief guests in the monthly meetings of the club. On

each such occasion interesting discussions have taken place.

"We charge Rs 1000 as membership fee for a year and arrange 22 meetings in an year. In every meeting we make sure to invite somebody who can contribute in one way or the other for the betterment of the women," adds Mrs. Hadi Khan, one of the vice presidents of the club. She says that at least four leading doctors have been invited to speak on the issue of women's health over a short period of time.

"We work hard to provide a healthy environment to the members," she continues. The members also come into contact with various NGOs and lots of social work has been undertaken from the platform of the Lahore Ladies Club. "Particularly in the days of flood, we do our utmost to help the needy," says Mrs. Meraj.

Many a time, huge funds have been collected for Kashmir as well. "Last time when we took our members to Kashmir, we took eleven packs full of clothes, medicines, blankets and other items that could be of some use

to the people of Kashmir," says Mrs. Meraj. "And every year we take our members on a ten-day trip. It is something members look forward to. So far we have taken the ladies to Swat, Abbottabad, Malam Jabba, Neelum Valley, Muzaffarabad and many historical places. This really gives them a chance to leave behind the worries of everyday life and get some time for themselves."

The trips are usually planned in the first week of April, and the members are offered the best hospitality by eminent people on these trips. "We have been guests of the president of Azad Kashmir who took us on a visit to the border areas," Mrs Meraj says.

The club has much else to offer to its members. It has a library with a selected collection of books, both by prominent English and Urdu writers. Whenever the ladies gather for the fortnightly meeting, they can be issued two books for fifteen days.

Also, it is the only club in the city where women can play tennis. In the past, the club had

offered badminton sessions for ladies but could not continue due to an absence of sufficient number of players. The president of the club says most of the women are not that sport spirited these days. However, in winter season, the club comes to life and a lot of young ladies come to join it to play lawn tennis.

Fancy dress show for children, meena bazaar and cooking classes are also held by the club every now and then. Yet they want to provide more recreational activities for women. "We have been thinking of constructing a swimming pool but are hesitant to take this step as we will have to depend more on the government. We always take care of the club on our own and nobody from the government has ever come forward to help us. It has always been our own effort," says the president of the club. "Nevertheless, it has proved to be good for us since we are not that answerable to the government."

The front hall of the club has been constructed with the contribution of members. Even the carpeting, air conditioning, and

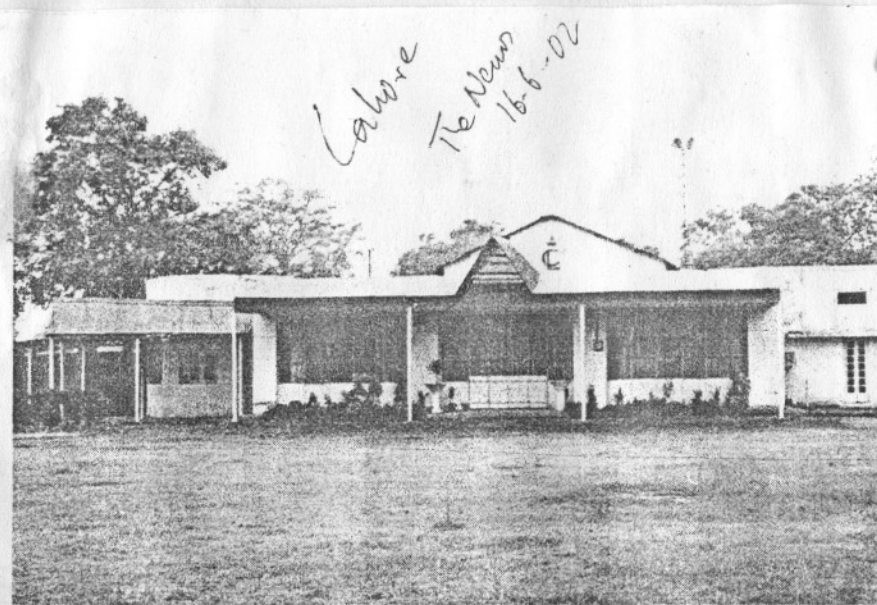
all the renovations since 1938 have been carried with members' contribution. The front hall wasn't constructed at the time of its establishment.

The club has a big lawn, which is now being used for wedding ceremonies. This began with the arrival of the new government. "Till then we were giving Rs. 5,000 as the lease money to the government but the new government increased the amount to Rs 11,500, which was quite a staggering increase," the president says. The members decided to rent out the lawn of the club for the weddings of the members' children or other family members. "The club management offers the place with light-

ing and a room for the bride for Rs 6,000 only. The rest has to be arranged by the client including catering, tents, etc. The other portions of the club are not given for wedding ceremonies.

In 1938 it was Feroz who used to take care of the place and now his sons who are also lawn tennis coaches, look after the entire place, arranging monthly meetings to the tennis classes to the booking of the lawns for the weddings. The family lives on club premises.

The club purely aims at providing entertainment and information to women from all classes. It looks forward to the younger generation to join the club and contribute towards the





betterment of women. "More and more young women should join the club. The place could serve as a platform to express themselves, particularly the increasing number of young working women who definitely have a right to some recreation," says Mrs Meraj.

Mrs Meraj thinks that the concept of a middle class woman becoming a member of some club is not very old and still needs time to be digested by her family in particular. "As we are moving towards development the day is not far when every woman will manage to have some time for herself, and our club is doing its bit on that way," she concludes.