

Lahore

Going, going, gone?

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I picked up *Dawn* on the morning of Wednesday, August 2. The very first item that hit me in the eye in the city pages was headlined "PR to sell Mayo Gardens". My heart sank. So, another landmark of Lahore was being laid to rest.

Mayo Gardens — the beautifully laid out and well-maintained colony of railway officers that one had come to associate with the equally well-run and comfortable railway journeys — had fallen on bad times like so many other legacies of the Raj that we lacked the wisdom to prize. The glory of Mayo Gardens has faded with the years, but it does not deserve to be abandoned.

How much longer will it be before its 125 acres of sprawling lawns, tall old trees and beautiful houses are acquired by some housing society at throwaway prices to build ugly soul-killing structures in concrete, standing cheek by jowl and lived in by people unmindful of their neighbours and oblivious of life as it should be lived — in peace, quiet and harmony with God's earth.

I closed my eyes shut as one image followed another. Mayo Gardens — a gem set close to the bank of the canal with the main railway line crossing the canal just outside it. One could hear the engine whistling and the carriages rolling as they sped southwards to Karachi, or north to the Lahore railway station.

Further along the canal is the Aitchison College spread out in majestic splendour. The dividing line

between the two was the Sunderdas Road, thickly grown with bamboos on the Aitchison College side, and mango trees on the side of the Mayo Gardens. Both have gone now, leaving the road ugly and bare. The Sunderdas Road opened on to the Davis Road — another landmark of Lahore — where the tall trees shed their blazing red flowers in spring to carpet the sidewalks that was a sin to walk on. A little further stands the Government House to the right and the impressing building of the Pakistan Administrative Staff College, (formerly the Punjab Club) to the left.

Although all governments make effort to provide housing to their employees, the Indian railway board in its despatch No 35 (of 1925) to the Secretary of State for India noted:

"The problem of housing railway staff stands by itself, and has peculiarities which preclude the application to it of any general rules which may have to be adopted for other government departments. While with the other departments it is more or less optional to have their staff, it is obligatory on railways to provide accommodation at every railway station for employees who in the interest of work have to reside on railway premises, and the number of such employees is considerable at junctions and other stations. Moreover, it has long been recognized that a contented and healthy staff conduces to economical and efficient working. With the object medical organizations have been set up on all railways,

and the improvement in the standard of living by means of providing suitable dwellings in healthy surroundings for as large a proportion of railway staff as may be practicable, is a necessary auxiliary to this purpose." (*Hundred years of Pakistan Railways*, p 69)

Accordingly, the railways laid out residential colonies, hospitals, maternity and child welfare centres, clubs, institutes, sports grounds, schools for their staff and officers, and reaped rich dividends in the form of good labour-management relations. The Pakistan railways till the late seventies were efficiently run, with little labour unrest.

The magnificent building of the railways headquarters on Empress Road (as it was then called) shaded by giant, hundred-year-old tree was the most graceful structure on that road. Some years back the beautiful iron railing in the front was removed, replaced by an ugly wall, which was soon covered with graffiti. The graffiti has now been removed and the wall painted a patchy red. A few days ago, I had occasion to visit the railway headquarters in connection with my pension, when I saw the area in front of the reservation office and the block housing the stores branch and the pension accounts office flooded with rain water. In all my 32 years of service with the Pakistan railways I had never seen so much rain water there. There was no way to get to the pension office. I got to the steps of the corridor leading to the GM's office,

then climbed the stairs to the first floor, traversed the two buildings, down the steps again in the stores branch, trespassing through an office to reach a tiny strip of dry land on the outside.

Walking gingerly on it, I reached the office of the accounts office. While my pension card was being made out, I sat dejected and forlorn gazing at the wide expanse of water and thinking of the days when there were grassy plots with flower beds. How long will it be when the railways headquarters building will also be sold to make way for a commercial plaza in that prime location?

Also for that matter the Cairns railway hospital, the Lahore divisional office, the traffic accounts branch, the Burt and Carson institutes and the railway staff quarters in that area, which have also fallen into disrepair due to shortage of funds and the absence of a strong administration. Will they all go the same way? We do not tire of calling Lahore the cultural capital of Pakistan, pointing out proudly to tourists its historical sights and recounting its traditions. And yet we are getting rid of one architectural landmark after another.

Some time back, there was a move to pull down the age-old Tollinton Market opposite the old university campus. Although only a market patronized mostly by Anglo-Indians in the past, and with no aesthetic beauty to commend it, it was a landmark of old Lahore. There was an uproar. No less a person than Nayyar Ali Dada, the

renowned architect, took up its cause with a promise to rebuild it on traditional lines.

The Anarkali Bazaar was planned to be repaired with coloured tiles and adorned with Mughal arches (what a ghastly idea!) which project was also given up after repairing the road portion from The Mall to the Nila Gumbad Chowk crossing.

Why are we so unmindful of our traditions and of our past? The railways buildings are in keeping architecturally, with the Lahore High Court, the National Museum, the old university campus, the Government College, the Central Training College.

The railways badly need a Yasmeen Lodi to take up cudgels for preservation of its heritage, and the grace and beauty that once was Lahore.

There is no denying that the railways lack capital for investment, be it for development or repair and maintenance. However, the neglect of the past so many years cannot be atoned for overnight. The railways all over the world are rich in the possession of land, and the Pakistan railways are no exception. Vast tracts of land all over Pakistan have been encroached upon. Every government has talked of cataloguing railway land and getting it vacated. Some serious effort needs to be made in that direction. The land thus freed can be sold off and not the 'family silver' which is priceless and has to be passed on to future generations.