

**T**he fame of Pak Tea House, perhaps the only place in Lahore which is widely known in throughout the Subcontinent, rests on its association with writers, and also as the venue of the weekly meetings of Halqa Arbab-e-Zauq. For the last more than thirty years, the Lahore Halqa had been holding its regular meetings in Pak Tea House, though the writers had been its major visitors even prior to Halqa meetings. Many eminent writers had their sittings and discussion meetings around its tables. It had become, indeed, the central place for writers, and whosoever visited Lahore, had his first wish to go to Pak Tea House to meet the writers as a matter of courtesy. It was always a happy occasion for all writers to visit the place and have an exchange of ideas with one another. As a matter of fact, neither Pak Tea House nor the Lahore Halqa had any parallel in the subcontinent.

But lately the owner of Pak Tea House decided to wind up the tea house, and convert it into a spare-parts shop. He pointed out that the tea house was running losses, and he had no other option but to close his tea-serving business. This decision of the owner created a crisis for Halqa Arbab-e-Zauq as it had no other available venue for holding its weekly meetings. "You may hold your meetings in the Green Belt or on the Nila Gumbad Road. I don't care," said Zahid, owner of the Tea House.

The Halqa is now a 63 years old forum of literary culture in Lahore. It was founded in 1939. Since 1966, it has been holding its regular weekly meetings on the premises of Pak Tea House. In the days of President Ayub Khan, and before the formation of

## Cultural metaphor

# Pak Tea House

Gilani Kamran

The News

Writers' Guild, the Halqa was asked by the government to receive a financial grant. The Executive Committee decided to decline the offer, as they were afraid that the grant might adversely affect Halqa's literary performance. The Asia Foundation had also offered a substantial aid to Halqa which was politely refused.

This literary forum has neither an office nor any means of conducting its meetings. It is a democratic forum, funded by its office-bearers, and by the donations of its members. With this meagre financial resource, it has completed its 63rd year of existence proudly and successfully!

On Sunday September 3rd, the General Body of the Halqa met the owner of Pak Tea House to negotiate on the issue. Ejaz Batalvi, Abid Manto, Intizar Husain, Hussain Majrooh, Anis Nagi, and other important writers joined the negotiations. The Tea House owner was heard in a cordial and sympathetic manner.

Hussain Majrooh suggested that if Zahid desired, the Halqa may run the Tea House, and pay Rs. 30,000/- p.m. to the owner to enable him to set his things right. It was surmised that the Tea House had incurred loss owing to negligent management. The General Body was hopeful that the loss could be met if greater care was given to the Tea House affairs. A Standing Committee was formed to look further into the difficult situation, and to save

both the Tea House and the venue of the Halqa's weekly meetings. Zahid's cause was Halqa's cause, too.

It may, however, be mentioned that in 1998, the Government of Pakistan had given a grant of two lakhs of rupees for the repair and furniture of Pak Tea House to improve its condition as the meeting place of writers. It is interesting to note that almost every foreign writer is interested in paying a visit to Pak Tea House and have a view of how literary issues are discussed in Lahore.

The American Students of Urdu Programme at California, Berkeley had been its frequent visitors in President Zia's times.

It is unfortunate that while ordinary play-acting has been accommodated in Al-Hamra in the name of culture and the Aiwan-e-Iqbal has been rented away and has become a commercial plaza, there is no place for a literary forum in the city. The previous government had closed the National Centre, though it is still lying desolate, vacant and almost ghost-like, and continues to pay rent to Al-Falah which had been constructed with the Benevolent Fund subscriptions of government servants.

We will be obliged if the Governor Punjab, himself, and on his own, cares to look into the matter, and provide a Room (rent-free) in Aiwan-e-Iqbal to Halqa Arbab-e-Zauq on permanent basis to save this literary forum from

wandering from place to place.

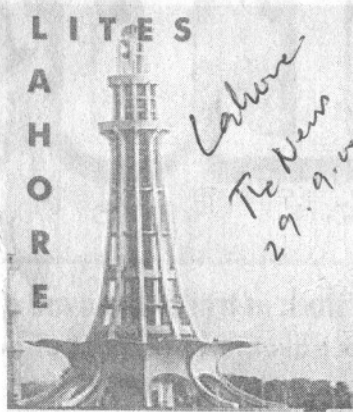
It is needless to remind that in the civilized world, literature is always treated as top priority item. In our country which is ideologically inspired by creative minds, there is hardly any room for writers or their collective meeting-place. The Halqa has indeed done its best through the long years of its existence, but it has in the present come to the cross-roads.

The YMCA building on The Mall, was, once the venue of Halqa's meetings. But some for reason the YMCA management refused to extend the privilege; although even now the rooms and halls of YMCA lie vacant, in extreme state of dilapidation. If YMCA extends a hand of friendship towards Halqa, its desolate rooms would revive and life would come back to its dying structure.

We approach the Church of Pakistan to come forth and help the Halqa for holding its meetings in YMCA building. We know that it is not within the responsibilities of the Church that it should provide help in literary matters, nevertheless, the Church can prevail upon YMCA management to accommodate the literary forum in its building.

It is however hoped that some good might come forth in the meantime, yet the news that Halqa would turn into a nomad, and have no place to go to, has caused anxiety and apprehension. The Halqa has been the city's identity mark since 1939, and has produced literary reputations during its long years of existence. The Pak Tea House should not therefore close its doors on Halqa. There is however every fear that with the Tea House becoming a spare-parts shop, the Halqa might cease to exist.

# Saving history from future



## Aamna Haider Isani

If Lahore were a zoo, its cultural heritage would be the endangered species, threatened by extinction.

The true essence of Lahore has always been its rich culture and exotically delicious cuisine and the city has always proudly thrived on its historic significance. The gaudy rows of cinemas on Abbott Road, the barbecue vendors in Lakshami, things as big as historical monuments and as trivial as individual *samosa*, *mithai* or even tea shops have lent it its identity. It is unfathomable for foreign tourists to visit Pakistan and leave without paying homage to the magnificent Mughal sites. Yet this enthusiasm is not being shared by our living generations.

The heritage that has given Lahore the fame it enjoys today is rapidly withering away and authorities and citizens both are responsible for pushing it towards deterioration and death. The love for the Shalimar Gardens, Front and Badshahi Mosque is being replaced by the new

blazing rage for building white elephants: plan as upon plazas. Builders are dumping them upon the city, and are suffocating the life of it.

Lahorites have entered an ineliminable rat race, which they hope might lead them into the 21st century. Their motto: "discard the old, hail the new". They have conveniently forgotten that successful nations build upon the past, not the future. This upcoming "plaza culture" has taken the city by storm. These buildings attempt to scrape the sky as far as they can. But they don't have a life! They are just modern day tombs. These plazas stand isolated once completed, and become parts of the never ending "slump" along with the rest of the nation. There is no conceivable purpose or need for their existence.

The list of unnecessary projects is endless. One example is "Pace", which was constructed as the first modern shopping mall in Lahore, supposedly meant to sport a number of foreign labels for the elite. Gradually, its self-sustaining powers began to weaken and now it has become a concrete version of the Anarkali bazaar. The escalators don't work, the cooling isn't effective, localised stalls have taken over a majority of the floors, and consequently it has lost its short-lived pomp and show.

While millions are spent to prune and polish these useless structures to perfection, our beloved old buildings are growing weedy and rusty. The Badshahi Mosque, Shalimar Gardens, Nur Jahan's, Asif Khan's and D'ai Anga's Tombs, Gulabi Bagh and Chauburji are only a segment of the wealth of heritage that is screaming for attention. Funds accumulated for them fall into black holes or pockets.

Although Shalimar Gardens are enlisted in the World Heritage and receive funds (which mysteriously disappear) from UNESCO, they are terribly neglected. The entire "new" city boasts of spluttering fountains at every corner, park and square, yet the majestic fountains of the Shalimar Gardens are almost always dry, dusty or silted. The previous government thoughtlessly ordered the desilting and filtration plant to be

ing and tearing down of roundabouts and building plazas and other white elephants, which seep up millions of rupees through their trunk. The answer to this imbalance in maintaining different parts of the same city lies in dishonest management of funds.

The hue and cry raised over issues like the Tollinton Market and Pak Tea House fall upon stone-deaf ears. Authorities are bent upon

## The answer to this imbalance in maintaining different parts of the same city lies in dishonest management of funds

brought down, in order to expand the main road. This has resulted in algae and fungus infections all over. It is quite a sorry sight.

Driving from the inner walled city down to the posh developed localities is a transition from the past to the present. Yet the past was ever so neglected, congested and filthy. While one unfortunate half of the city lives in darkness, the other half celebrates highly illuminated trees and buildings. The patch of the canal bank between the Mall and Jail Road displays a horribly ugly set of brightly-lit characters that are supposed to be decorative. These "little" projects are meant to benefit a specific group of people who take on these projects on contract or *theka*.

One man is responsible for the management or rather mismanagement of the entire city. This one-man show includes the maintenance of already maintained roads, cyclic build-

ing a cultural centre in Tollinton market, whereas this centre was intended to be incorporated within the Lahore Museum. It's another Lok Virsa Museum in the making, another money-making scheme. No one visits the Lok Virsa in Islamabad and no one will want to go to see a bunch of tired artifacts here. It's just a project to pocket funds.

There are so many remedies to these problems, if anyone would sincerely take notice. Funds given by the government and UNESCO should be put to constructive use. Capable people should be employed to monitor the conservation of these heirlooms. Lahore has the highest number of old monuments in the entire country; they should be preserved and developed into major tourists attractions. Many Taj Mahals are hidden behind the walls of the inner city, waiting to be discovered and appreciated by the world. It is time to cleanse out the pests that inhibit this vital development.