

The neglected

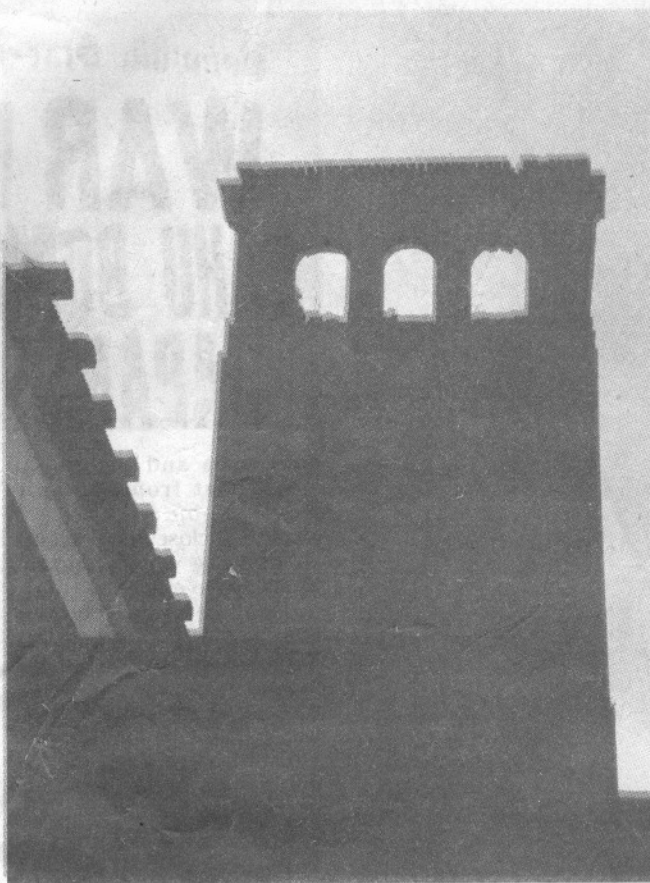
Almost all departments established institutions for the promotion of arts and culture — but the

During the colonial period, almost all the big departments played a role larger than the specific functions for which they were created.

These departments had a number of theatre groups, music ensembles and libraries for the overall cultural growth of its employees. Unfortunately, that tradition has slowly died out due to a number of reasons: the most important being the lack of awareness that such activity is essential for the development of a wholesome personality and a healthy society.

Take the case of Nazir Zaigham, the person who had devoted so much time and energy in setting up theatre in Pakistan. Soon after partition he was associated with Pakistan Medical Corps Centre. This group comprised officials of Army and others, who had the talent and the expertise to do theatre. This company traveled where the Army Corps were stationed or camped, and performed not necessarily for the corps but for the larger audience interested in theatre. They performed plays like Saad e Hawas, Anarkali, Sati Vashia and Baap ka Gunah. Those in the group who went on to be successful in theatre and music were Mohsin Rizvi, M.J Thakur, Naseem Begum, Irin Parveen, Salim Raza, Rehman Varma, Safdar, S.M.Batish, Nadira and Shahida.

This group before partition staged most of its activities in the United Provinces (UP) but moved to Pakistan and continued



to perform with the old gusto. During the recruitment drives these theatres were used more as instruments of propaganda. Originally, it was for the disciplining of the troops and instilling in them the values of a righteous cause, but it often happened that the enthusiasts among them exceeded the limits and did plays for their own plea-

sure.

In Railways, many institutions were established for plays and musical performances. Burt Institute in Lahore was particularly designed to be a theatre hall for the performances of plays. It was popularly known as Nach Ghar, which meant a dance hall but actually was built to be a theatre with properly equipped



Burt Institute in Lahore was for the performances of plays which meant a dance hall properly equipped stage and

stage and all the requirements that go with it. But except for the early days after independence it was hardly ever used for theatre. It was occasionally used for musical shows and even badminton tournaments, but it was never properly exploited for the purpose that it was built for.

Railways had a drama club and plays were staged all over

Halls of culture

Lahore 01/02/01 News

that tradition died soon after as it was labeled frivolous and unnecessary, writes **Sarwat Ali**



Rahat Dar

It was particularly designed to be a theatre hall for plays. It was popularly known as Nach Ghar, a hall but actually was built to be a theatre with stage and all the requirements that go with it.

the undivided India in similar institutions established by the department. Even in the Western Railway, which is now Pakistan Railways, 30 such institutions functioned. Burt Institute was burnt down in a fire in the late-sixties or early-seventies, and since then has been converted into an office space.

The full impact of the loss

was never realized and now it is about to be sold off to some private party as part of the privatisation plan of the department.

In the storeroom of Griffin Institute of the Railways, books and a piano are stashed away in a state of advanced disrepair, only treated as junk and disposed of as such. It was a painful reminder of its former activity as

neither could the piano be repaired nor are experts left to tune and play it properly.

Another Railway Institute, Carson Institute, too was a club basically for sports and recreation. It fell into neglect, as the grounds were not maintained - serving as a sewer for the adjoining encroachments while its building nearly collapsed. The grounds which had been taken over by the Prime Minister's Housing Scheme were luckily saved, as the Nawaz Sharif lost his job but not the books, and in the actual structure was a library which had about a thousand books including classics of literature, philosophy and religion. And all this while, no one bothered to open those cupboards - and the books were either eaten by termites or paper fish or destroyed by dampness.

Police was another department, which had a few clubs and was known for its bands. Now what remains are those bands, which at best are only used for marriages besides doing their duty in march-pasts and marches.

After partition some efforts were made in some departments to promote cultural, sports and recreational activities. In Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), a cultural troupe was established in 1966 for the promotion of Pakistani culture at home and abroad. The troupe was elevated when Zia Mohyeddin was made its director, and it did many good performances, toured the world and helped in changing the stereo-

type image of the country. But then this troupe too was closed down, and the PIA performing Arts Academy first became dormant and then wound up.

All these big departments which at one time were supposed to also play a role in the educational, cultural and sports activities of the country gradually started to consider it an unnecessary burden. If PIA was supposed to transport passengers and lift cargo what did it have to do with the performing arts. And Army was only supposed to fight, not indulge in theatre. As this thinking seeped in, it became only a matter of time before these departments started to shed the responsibility that was seen to be imposed on them. Sports are probably the only activity, which is still taken with some seriousness but not quite.

Perhaps, the financial crunch too has a lot to do with the gradual closing down of these facilities. But more than that the bosses and the general climate in the country does not allow such activity, labeling it as frivolous and unnecessary - even going to the extent of calling it immoral.

The other reason could be emphasis on specialisation: it was thought that the more specialised departments should be dealing with culture than the department which were actually involved in defending the country or transporting passenger and goods. Unfortunately the specialised departments too have not come up to the mark. Their performance has been quite appalling. ♦