

Graffiti, a cognizable offence

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ON Nov 24, 1998, the defunct Punjab Assembly voted in favour of an amendment to the Punjab Prohibition on Expressing Matters on Walls Act, enabling the provincial government to enforce the law passed in April, 1995, which banned graffiti and all kinds of wall chalking in the city. The law would have acted as a deterrent for those, who abuse vacant spaces on the walls for self-projection.

In the recent past, the Metropolitan Corporation of Lahore tried to give the city a cleaner look. It launched a number of special drives, including those aimed at removing encroachments and resurfacing several roads. However, one aspect of beautification, which escaped the attention of the city government, was the scourge of graffiti. This civic sore — large billboards, wall-chalking and posters affixed on buildings, should have been combated much earlier on a permanent basis. So widespread has this menace become that it even attracted the attention of generally unconcerned citizens, as well as tourists.

Lexicographically defined, graffiti means drawings or writings on a wall, especially of a rude or political nature. In Lahore, and also elsewhere in the province, one notices all kinds of messages on the walls, including the boundary walls of public parks. These writings include advertisements claiming a cure for baldness, venereal diseases, women's problems and local substitutes of Viagra, palmistry and astrology, and guess papers for "guaranteed success" in various

board and university examinations.

Graffiti also include political, religious, sectarian and even ethnic slogans, which incite hatred among various communities and followers of various schools of thought. Even after six months of the completion of elections to local bodies under the new devolution plan, photographs and election symbols of candidates have not been removed from the walls and gates of public and private buildings in several areas of the city.

The evil of wall chalking, which has perpetrated itself for long, should now be combated without any delay. Laws now exist on the statute book, which authorize the government to take appropriate administrative/legal action against those who show no respect or concern for the aesthetic sensibilities of the people. Besides being unethical, it is illegal to use the space of a private house for advertising of any kind, without the permission of the owner. The same is true of public property, which often falls an easy prey to the excesses committed by unscrupulous elements in society.

District governments should be supported by political and religious parties, and social welfare organizations, which should try to prevail upon their members not to use the walls of public and private properties for writing slogans or advertisements of any kind.

After the enactment of an amendment to the Act referred to above, graffiti or wall chalking on public and private properties, became a cognizable offence. Any slogan or

advertisement written on unauthorized billboards and walls is now the legal responsibility of the district government, which should act not only against those who deface the properties, but also the advertisers on whose behalf the graffiti is employed.

To begin with, warnings should be issued to the individuals or groups, who indulge in this activity, requiring them at the same time to obliterate all writings from the walls of public and privately-owned properties in the city. If they do not respond, appropriate legal action should be taken against those on whose behalf advertisements or slogans have been written on the walls.

To give the city a better look and also to create an aesthetically pleasing environment, it is imperative that eyesores like vulgar wall chalking are removed from all areas of Lahore.

Admittedly, it will not be an easy task to discipline chronic violators of the law. However, strong will on the part of the newly-elected Nazims will help the administrators of civic affairs to rid the provincial metropolis, and towns of these eyesores.

Removal of graffiti from city walls should be regarded as a part of Lahore's beautification project, which, was launched a year ago. The 115 wards of the metropolis, irrespective of their economic, business, political or social importance, should be a part of the master plan prepared for restoring Lahore to its pristine glory. Once known for its beautiful parks and stately trees, Lahore has suffered much from years of neglect.