

Dotted with historical wonders

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MOBASHIR AHMAD enumerates some of the interesting but forgotten places perched in the Salt Range

The Salt Range, once known as 'Koh-i-Jud', derives its name from extensive deposits of rock salt. It stands as significant remnant of forts with bastions and temples. Exceptionally, this region maintains an almost continuous record of temples that can define the evolution of 'Gandhara-Nagara' architecture. The forts and temples surviving along the range are a reminder of how untouched many of the ancient remnants are.

For the first time traveller, the scenery through out the range is rocky, wanting in softness and beauty. In many parts it becomes barren and uninviting. But, in truth the range is dotted with historical wonders, romantic legends, archaeological remains and varying geological formations. Urial is also found in the range though facing extinction. Journey along the range from Tilla Goggian to Kallar Kahar lake is exiting as well as informative.

After crossing river Jhelum from Rasul Barrage, one passes through 1138 hectares of 'Rasul Barrage Wildlife Sanctuary'. In winters, this protected sanctuary is full of native and migrated waterfowls. Flocks of Siberians Cranes and Storks and local black winged Stilts are the commonest sights in the area. Though at the dawn of the hot summer day I could only see few Tobas hovering over their morning catch flocks of Murghabis (wild ducks).

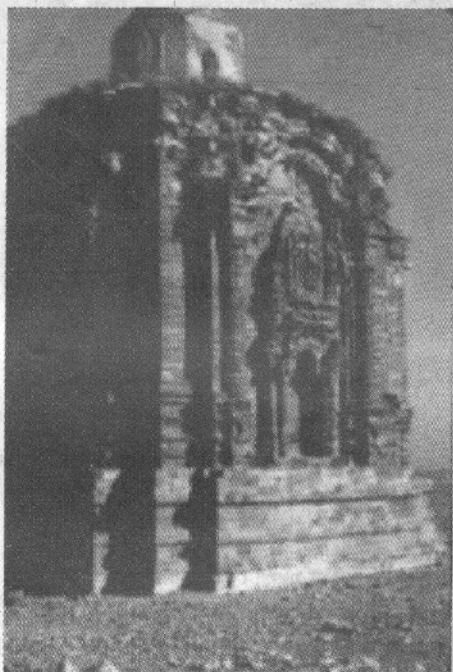
Tilla Joggian, a famous monastery of Jogi Gorakhnath, is situated at the very head of Kahan Valley, 3242 feet above sea level. Even in ruins the monastery is impressive. Many might have sat here in the posture of dhian (meditation), others chanted *mantars*. In early sixteenth century, Baba Guru Nanak visited this place and stayed here for some time. The dust of ages has gathered over and settled in deep layers on the pedestal where he used to meditate and pray. In the centre, all that remains of a water pond is an outline and a flight of stairs. Folklore hero Dhido Rangha also came here and returned with bagging bowl (kashkol - famous these days) in hand.

Situated in the beautiful 'bela' of River Jhelum is historic village Mong. The conflict between Alexander and Porus took place at this ancient village. This was a garrison of King Porus who assembled 30,000 men, 2000 cavalry, and 200 elephant against Macedonians. Later, 112 persons from this village participated in the First World War; out of those six laid their lives. Today, probably the biggest village in Punjab having 22 mosques stands at the ruined mound - accumulated debris of ages. Next on the road and tucked inside the Salt Range is a village Jalalpur that was built by Alexander in the memory of his general who was killed in the battle with Porus at the crossing of Jhelum. Coins found among the ruins date back to the period of Graeco-Bactrian kings. Remains of the ancient walls are still there at the summit of the hill, which rise 1000 feet above the present Jalalpur.

Jhelum-Pind Dadan Khan Road runs parallel to the legendary Salt Range on one side and River Jhelum on the other. Heavy traffic to and from Gharib Wall Cement Factory and seasonal torrents has damaged the road at many places that is in obvious need of more culverts and causeways. The portion between the road and the river is arable out of which the villages seem to rise like isles in an ocean of green.

About five miles north of Pind Dadan Khan lies salt mine with largest known deposits of salt in the world. The deposit extends towards the summit of the hill above the village Khewra (1650 feet above sea level) and goes down to a great depth below the present floor level of the mine. When the salt was first worked out is not know; but the excavation existed on the spot as far back as the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar. The locals tell that the first settlement of miners dates back to early Muslim era. The mine was named after Lord Mayo in 1870 when qualified mining engineers were appointed and a scientific system of working was introduced. These days, Soda Ash is also manufactured in Khewra using locally available salt and limestone.

The mines are spread over 110 Kilometres square area. The three miles long journey inside the mines is amazing. The climate inside is warmer in winters and cool in summers. Visitors see Chandni Chowk, Minar-e-Pakistan, Shahi Mosque, Anarkalli and Sheesh Mahal in the way. The guides are sure to point out one smooth and flat salt wall about which it is famous that a wish is granted if any one taste salt from that spot. I do not believe in such things but do taste salt from there whenever I visit the Salt Mines.



Ruins of a temple in Malot

days. The guides also give the story of a king who loved his wife so much that he loved him? The one who said she loves him like salt fell from grace till later when she was able to prove her love for the king by practically demonstration, in a dinner party, that nothing tastes like salt.

Hindu traditions represent the Salt Range as the refuge of the 'Pandavas' during the period of their exile and every salient point in its scenery is connected with some legend of their national heroes. A 'bavli' (big water pool) is situated in Kitas in the centre of the Salt Range near Choa Sadan Shah. A romantic Brahmanical story is that Siva being inconsolable at the death of his wife Sati, tears rained from his eyes and formed two pools: one at Kitas (raining eyes) and the other at Pushkar near Ajmer. The Kitas pool is partly artificial, the rocks having been cut to enlarge the natural basin in the bed of the drain.

The remains of seven temples built about eighth and ninth century (AD) clustered in the corner of the old fort still stand. This cluster is considered as an example of Nagara tower. Scholars have referred this cluster of temples as the 'Post Islamic Contact', that is, after the seventh to eighth century AD, because of their use of mortar, rubble filled between masonry walls, arches and glanced interior domes. These temples display a new lore and knowledge of Nagara formulas. They are totally neglected and fast falling into decay.

Architecturally, this area is best known for an enormous number of Buddhists sculptural and structural crumbs in which architectural traditions from India, Central Asia and classical work appear aligned. On the precipitous spur projecting from the southern edge of the Salt Range, about 15 kilometres west of Kitas, are situated relics of Malot fort and temple. Aural Stein, Alexander Cunningham and Ananda Kumaraswamy focused their attention on the fort said to have been built in tenth century. The temple stands on the extreme edge of the cliff. It is in early Kashmiri style, built of sandstone, badly ruined by the actions of time and weather. The temple was 18 feet square wide with remarkable fluted pilasters and capitals that have completely vanished. This temple gives evidence of formal links to the architecture of Kashmir.

Then there is a place called Nandna, where larger temples were built under the command of Hindu kings. The place was one of the destinations of Mahmud Ghaznavi in 1014. Abu Rehan Al Beroni established his station for astronomical observation in order to measure the radius of the earth at Nandna. Only scattered stones and some relics of the fort and multi-storied temple sprawling on the hill give the evidence that this place was once inhabited and the centre of activity. Later, Mughal rulers used to come here for hunting. Even the footfalls of the people many of whom changed the course of history have been swallowed up by the wind sighing down the tabletop valley. Other archaeological ruins in the range exist at Kusak.

The architects of these temples in the Salt Range knew that they were working within a variety of options. Architecture could keep their creativity, and through their creative action, temple could evolve in varied ways. These seem deliberate to have left a record of their architectural experiments by placing shrine model as niches on the walls of many temples. The eloquence of architectural representation in South Asia more often relates to a myth rather than reality, yet from time to time the two overlaps. In Gandhara sculpture, for example, the variety of recognisable Buddha types seems some times to point to specific cases of pilgrimage. So also in the Salt Range, architectural experimentation gave coeval expression to how the minds of its architects worked as well as provided a model of God's creation.

Indeed the geographical position of the range on the route, through which so many conquerors have entered India, from Greek to Mughal, have made it a land of fortresses and guarded defiles, and has turned its people into hereditary warriors.

The Salt Range also nestles the beautiful Kallar Kahar Lake. One kilometre radius natural lake has been developed into a modern recreational spot. It has surely become one of the most scenic places in the country outside the popular hill resorts. A beautiful monument Takhat-i-Babri has been constructed in Bagh-i-Safa – the first Mughal Garden in the Subcontinent – where peacocks are living in natural environment. Shrine of Saint Ho Bahoo is also situated in the vicinity of the lake. 'Kallar Kahar National Park' project once dumped being non-feasible is again being revived. May be people have something nice to see in the near future ■