

After an agonisingly long period of official indifference, the Heritage Trail project of the government has raised fresh hopes that historical monuments in Peshawar will regain some of their lost glory, writes

**Haroon Rashid**

Peshawar is one of the oldest living cities in Pakistan and boasts of a rich heritage which has not only withstood rigours of time, but also official neglect.

The magnificent Qila Bala Hisar, the artistically designed Sethi Houses, the historic Chowk Yadgaar and Qissa Khwani Bazaar, the ancient Gor Gathrie and Kotla Mohsin Khan, the Clock Tower and Masjid Mahabat Khan; each one with a history of its own, each one a jewel in itself.

Most nations would preserve such an invaluable asset with utmost care. Sadly, like elsewhere in the country, the monuments in Peshawar have seldom received due official attention and as time passed, signs of wear and tear were making it more and more ominous. However, the Heritage Trails plan of the NWFP government has raised fresh hopes that these historical sites will soon regain some of their old glory.

In their present state, these old sites draw a large number of foreign tourists. All that is needed now is a bit of good sense and committed effort and Peshawar can be transformed into an even more attractive tourist resort.

Under the NWFP government project, a pilot Heritage Trail conservation plan has been proposed from Gor Gathrie to the majestic Bala Hisar Fort, covering all historical sites in the area. The plans, if implemented fully and properly, could give a big boost to tourism in the province.

Restoration work is already under progress, though slowly, at Gor Gathrie and Kotla Mohsin Khan.

The federal Archaeology Department is now in the middle of the project at Gor Gathrie while the Conservation Cell of Urban Development Board is working at Kotla Mohsin Khan.

The Gor Gathrie project is in its

# To the rescue of history

Heritage

The News 26.4.96



Gor Gathrie, the western gateway during conservation work; (right) as it stood before the work began.

third year. That it has only reached the half-way mark so far is due to various reasons, lack of sufficient funds being the major one.

"We have not been released even half of the amount for the project as yet," Saeedur Rehman, deputy director of Archaeology Department, told *The News on Friday*.

At present, work is in progress on the western gate and the flanking walls of Gor Gathrie, facing the old city of Peshawar.

The monument, situated on an eminence to the east of the city, has been witness to many vicissitudes over the years.

Before the supporting hand of the government came to its rescue, it was dangerously close to the point of crumbling.

Sadly, many of its portions were actually demolished by the government departments themselves on the plea that they were dangerous to human life or were obstructing vehicular traffic.

A plaque at the monument reads: "Protected monument under the provision of Section 19 of Antiquities Act 1975. Any person who damages or disfigures this monument is liable to imprisonment which extends to three years or fine or both."

This law was never invoked against the erring officials in the government-run departments.

In his book 'Peshawar: Past and Present' (1945), S. M. Jaffar says Gor Gathrie, also known as Sarai Begum Sahiba, is believed to be of Brahmanical rather than of Buddhist origin and character.

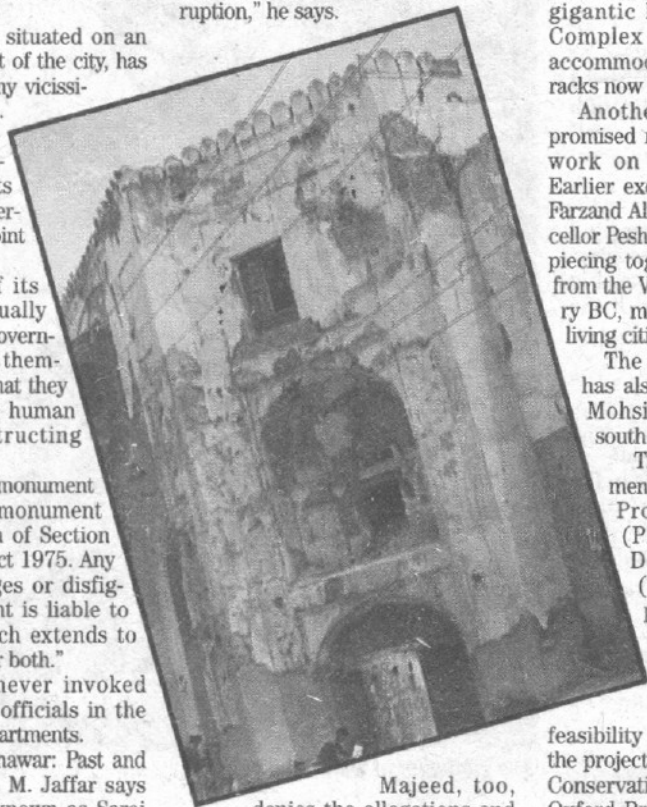
The great Chinese traveller, Hsuan Tsang who visited Peshawar in 630 A.D., found 100 Brahmanical temples in the city.

Mughal kings Babar and Akbar in their writings corroborate what Tsang had said. However, the present structure is believed to be built by Jehan Ara, daughter of Shahjehan, in the 17th century A.D., as a caravan sarai (inn).

Roughly, Rs 2.5 million have been allocated for Gor Gathrie conservation project. However, experts believe that a much bigger amount would be needed for a comprehensive conservation job.

Gor Gathrie complex will require nearly Rs 70 million," says M.A. Majeed, an archaeological engineer engaged in work on the site.

There have been a few complaints about sub-standard work under the project and allegations of corruption have also been made. Saeedur Rehman dismisses these allegations as totally baseless. "We are not getting millions of rupees here that could lead to corruption," he says.



Majeed, too, denies the allegations and claims that the work being carried out is of excellent standard.

Despite these denials by the officials, a complaint to the prime minister recently resulted in the visit to the site by the director general of Archaeology Department. "Fortunately, we have full pictorial proof of all stages of work," Rehman says.

Work, he adds, is being carried out keeping in mind the original structure. The original vaulting procedure is being followed for filling of roofs of nine rooms. "Vaulting is an old and expensive way of roof-making. It were the British who had replaced it with wooden logs," he informs.

"Vaulting costs 10 times more than RCC roofs but we do it for the

sake of originality," Majeed elaborates.

There are more than one manifestation of the fact that fortunes have finally started to favour the old Gor Gathrie.

Apart from the conservation work, the police, occupying the building for the last many years, will be vacating it hopefully by May 1997. By that time, it is expected that they would have completed a gigantic Rs 17.7 million Police Complex at Pir Bana Road to accommodate its offices and barracks now housed at Gor Gathrie.

Another good news is the promised resumption of excavation work on the premises shortly. Earlier excavation work led by Dr Farzand Ali Durrani, now vice chancellor Peshawar University, helped in piecing together Peshawar's profile from the Victorian era to 2nd century BC, making it one of the oldest living cities of the country.

The provincial government has also started work on Kotla Mohsin Khan, located in the south of the city of Peshawar.

The dilapidated old monument has been selected by the Project Management Unit (PMU) of Urban Development Board (PUDB) as part of its plans to restore and preserve the beauty of all old historical buildings in the province.

Initial spadework, like feasibility and documentation, for the project has been done by PMU's Conservation Cell with the help of Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom while the provincial government has released the funds. The services of Anjumane Memaraan, a Lahore-based non-governmental organisation which specialises in the field of preservation, has been acquired to undertake the delicate work. It will provide trained manpower like architects, engineers and draftsmen while the PMU will look after the project management, labour and material.

Another positive development in this direction is the revitalisation of the National Fund for Cultural Heritage after a long pause. It approved grants for restoration of a Sethi House and Kotla Mohsin Khan recently in a meeting at Peshawar. It is a small first step, that could not have been delayed any longer.