

A good number of old houses in the walled city pose danger of collapsing anytime, a constant threat to lives of the dwellers

By Ather Naqvi

Abdul Latif, a dealer in newspaper waste at Chowk Masti, Lohari, has a shop roughly four by six feet in size with considerably swollen walls and moth-eaten wooden roof which have not been repaired for long. These are not the only noticeable features of the shop — there are cracks in the walls, so wide that one can peep through them.

But Latif is happy amid all this. Not because he likes playing stunts, he has no choice. He has to earn a livelihood for himself and his family.

Squatting barefoot on the floor covered by the old newspapers, he is in the habit of looking at the ceiling every now and then, which it looks is about to cave in. Without compromising the speed with which he is sorting out newspaper waste in the dimly lit room, Latif tells *TNS* why he continues to work in danger. "Whenever I ask the owner of this shop to get it repaired, he

buildings

asks me in return to vacate the shop. I pay rupees one thousand in rent for this shop. If I vacate it I am not going to get another one for this amount."

Danger abodes

Latif has also come up with a consolation for himself. "I think the owner of this building is right in saying that this shop is too old to be repaired. You see the cracks and the overall condition of the roof. It will eventually have to be demolished. But whenever we think of demolishing it the residents of the upper stories of this building become an irritant," he says. Latif is just one of the many walled city residents whose lives are at risk. This is a dilemma every third dweller inside the walled city is faced with.

Taking a stroll in the narrow and usually dark streets of the walled city is like stepping into an altogether different world, especially if you happen to be new to the area. Besides, the food items, undoubtedly a part and parcel of the social and cultural activity here, old buildings from the pre-colonial and colonial times overlooking the busy

bazars below them, complete the picture. These buildings, some of them more than two hundred years old and very likely to come down any time, are occupied by people at their peril. Worse still, the Ravi Town administration's notices to the owners of various old buildings, to vacate them so that they be demolished, are not always complied with.

Muhammad Sharif, in his late 70s, who has been served the notice twice to vacate a building, says he cannot ever think of leaving the place where his forefathers had settled after coming all the way from Panipat well before the partition of the subcontinent. "Now my sons and daughters and their sons and daughters live here. You living in the modern cities cannot empathize with us," he says. "This area is now my home and this building is as dear to me as my sons and daughters. Who can dare ask me to leave it? He is convinced that the building is not in as bad a shape as it apparently looks. "Chuna has been used in the walls of this building. This is not going to collapse I believe."

Most of the people of the area share Muhammad Sharif's view about the condition of the building. "You see the arched roof?" asks Gulzar Ahmad, pointing to the ceiling. He runs a barber shop in what he claims to be a building of the Mughal era. "It is because of the architecture of these buildings that these have stood the ravages of weather."

He understands though that some of the buildings in the area are past their life and have to be demolished. "Financial constraint is the main hurdle in their maintenance. People have no option. If today they demolish the building they live in on city government's orders they don't have



People still reside in these old buildings.

umber
uses
lled

f
g
a
t threat
of the
S
er Naqvi

Abdul Latif, a dealer in newspaper waste at Chowk Masti, Lohari, has a shop roughly four by six feet in size with considerably swollen walls and moth-eaten wooden roof which have not been repaired for long. These are not the only noticeable features of the shop — there are cracks in the walls, so wide that one can peep through them.

But Latif is happy amid all this. Not because he likes playing stunts, he has no choice. He has to earn a livelihood for himself and his family.

Squatting barefoot on the floor covered by the old newspapers, he is in the habit of looking at the ceiling every now and then, which it looks is about to cave in. Without compromising the speed with which he is sorting out newspaper waste in the dimly lit room, Latif tells *TNS* why he continues to work in danger. "Whenever I ask the owner of this shop to get it repaired, he

Dangerous abodes

Latif has also come up with a consolation for himself. "I think the owner of this building is right in saying that this shop is too old to be repaired. You see the cracks and the overall condition of the roof. It will eventually have to be demolished. But whenever we think of demolishing it the residents of the upper stories of this building become an irritant," he says. Latif is just one of the many walled city residents whose lives are at risk. This is a dilemma every third dweller inside the walled city is faced with.

Taking a stroll in the narrow and usually dark streets of the walled city is like stepping into an altogether different world, especially if you happen to be new to the area. Besides, the food items, undoubtedly a part and parcel of the social and cultural activity here, old buildings from the pre-colonial and colonial times overlooking the busy

bazars below them, complete the picture. These buildings, some of them more than two hundred years old and very likely to come down any time, are occupied by people at their peril. Worse still, the Ravi Town administration's notices to the owners of various old buildings, to vacate them so that they be demolished, are not always complied with.

Muhammad Sharif, in his late 70s, who has been served the notice twice to vacate a building, says he cannot ever think of leaving the place where his forefathers had settled after coming all the way from Panipat well before the partition of the subcontinent. "Now my sons and daughters and their sons and daughters live here. You living in the modern cities cannot empathize with us," he says. "This area is now my home and this building is as dear to me as my sons and daughters. Who can dare ask me to leave it? He is convinced that the building is not in as bad a shape as it apparently looks. "Chuna has been used in the walls of this building. This is not going to collapse I believe."

Most of the people of the area share Muhammad Sharif's view about the condition of the building. "You see the arched roof?" asks Gulzar Ahmad, pointing to the ceiling. He runs a barber shop in what he claims to be a building of the Mughal era. "It is because of the architecture of these buildings that these have stood the ravages of weather."

He understands though that some of the buildings in the area are past their life and have to be demolished. "Financial constraint is the main hurdle in their maintenance. People have no option. If today they demolish the building they live in on city government's orders they don't have

the money to reconstruct the building," he says.

"One solution is to give these people loans on easy installments so that they can re-build their demolished houses. But right now there is no such scheme," says Shahzad Ali, a former resident of Masti Chowk, now residing in Krishan Nagar.

There is a general impression among the people there that as soon as people residing in the walled city get better off financially they leave the walled city and rent out these old buildings. "This Lal Haveli in the Totay Wala Bazar has been rented out to a businessman. Today different parts of shoes are made here," says Liaquat Commando, who owns a shoe shop in the Totay Wala Bazar. The owners of these old buildings seldom come here to see what is happening to their buildings, hence no repairs. Just a couple of days ago a part of the wooden roof of that building collapsed. Fortunately, there was nobody in the building," he says.

But the indifference on the part of the owners of these buildings continues to take its toll. "Last year a child died after falling from a roof top. The family has now moved to some other part of the city. Those who have money have constructed new buildings in place of the old ones," says Zahid Butt, a resident of Masti Chowk.

The officials of the Town and Planning Department of Ravi Town say that regular inspections of the walled city are undertaken to identify the dangerous buildings. "At times the residents themselves request us through application to demolish their houses. We charge a nominal fee to undertake the process," he says.

buildings

asks me in return to vacate the shop. I pay rupees one thousand in rent for this shop. If I vacate it I am not going to get another one for this amount."



They still reside in these old buildings.