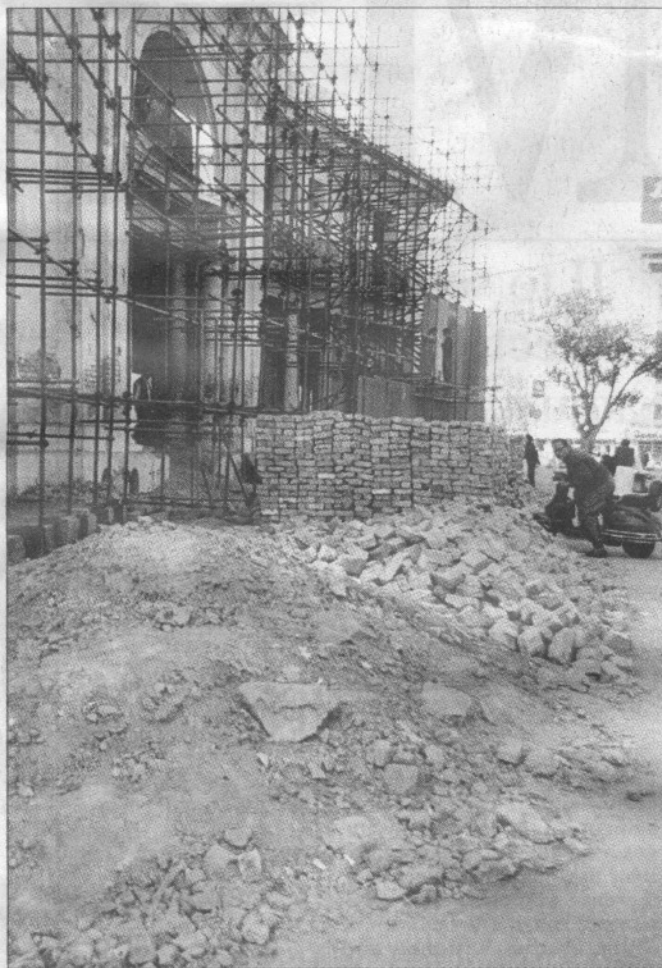


Encroachments everywhere

By Saeed Malik



BUILDING material dumped on The Mall service lane. —Dawn

LAHORE is choked by massive encroachments, which have turned it into an ugly metropolis, in addition to obstructing the smooth flow of traffic. In the past, several half-hearted efforts were made by the city government to remove illegal occupation of public property, but a combination of factors, including corruption in the department concerned, have foiled these attempts.

Shopkeepers in almost all areas of the city display their merchandize, including items of grocery on footpaths and covered verandahs in the markets without any fear of being taken to task by MCL-LDA inspectors. The owners of small workshops have occupied empty spaces on roads that do not belong to them, creating occasional traffic muddles and inconvenience to the pedestrians.

Vendors of all sorts, especially fruit sellers, with their push-carts, have occupied every inch of available space along both sides of the roads, completely blocking the footpaths for the pedestrians. In certain areas, footpaths on both sides of the roads have virtually disappeared. One does not find any space on a number of busy roads such as Hall Road, Multan Road, Ferozepur Road from Mozang Chungi to the Canal Bank, Bahawalpur Road, Temple Road, Nabha Road, Nila Gumbad and at many points on Circular Road that rings the city.

The current chaotic situation on city roads is the accumulation of years of neglect, inefficiency and corruption in several departments, which are in one way or the other concerned with the upkeep of city roads. Factors, which have created chaos in the civic affairs of the city are the greed of shopkeepers, who illegally sublet vacant spaces in front of their shops, corruption among road inspec-

tors and the collusive support by Wapda employees. Now that almost every road in the city seem clogged and the shop owners have turned the illegal business of sub-letting into a de facto right, the city administration finds it difficult to clear the provincial metropolis of unlawful encroachments.

Touring the city, one finds a large number of fruit juice sellers, purveyors of food and several items of daily consumption using Wapda electricity, either

courtesy of the shopkeepers or with the support of employees of the electricity sub-division concerned. One thing which beats the imagination of the citizens is the installation of power meters on tree trunks, walls of verandahs or on the khokhas illegally built by the vendors on state land. According to Wapda rules, power meters can be installed only on the premises of the owners after evidence of ownership has been provided to the sub-divisional officer concerned. Are

the Wapda SDOs in various subdivisions or their subordinates not supposed to patrol their areas of jurisdiction regularly to check any violation of the law?

Similarly, the LDA or MCL road inspectors are appointed to regularly check violations of municipal laws in their beats. On paper, they do, but in practice they deliberately look the other way when encroachments are made on municipal property after settling a mutually agreed upon quid pro quo. Their modus operandi is to collect the settled amount either on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Whenever a special drive is launched by the LDA or the MCL, these corrupt employees of these civic bodies inform their "clients" well in advance of the raids, enabling them to temporarily remove encroachments to show the raiding officials that all is well in their areas. According to one reckoning, each darogha (inspector) of these areas receives a minimum of Rs20,000 per month in illegal gratification. In certain busy areas, the amounts touch the six-digit mark.

Similarly SDOs or line superintendents of the Wapda subdivisions concerned make an extra buck every month by allowing illegal connections to the vendors, who sell their merchandize on street corners or on footpaths. According to Wapda rules, no consumer can give an extension from his power lines to any one in the neighbourhood. But this is being done on a large scale.

If the LDA/MCL inspectors and Wapda SDOs or line superintendents keep an eye on the unauthorized use of power in their areas, encroachments on public or private properties can be effectively checked. This is not being done simply because the illegal money allegedly collected by these corrupt officials is shared by their superiors.