

What would have been sold as scrap is preserved as a collection of railway memorabilia in a museum outside Rawalpindi

*Railway
The News
28.11.11*

By Salman Rashid

railway



A pie dish from the collection

Only a year ago, no one would have noticed Golra railway station just outside Rawalpindi on the line leading to the north-west. It was a shambles. Painted the prescription pale yellow, it had disintegrating platforms and the days of its lovely timber veranda were nearly over. Then the strangest events began to take place. This was the kind of thing that is not known to happen in Pakistan, and for no other reason but that, this story needs to be told.

In June 2003, the Divisional Superintendent (DS) of Rawalpindi railway division, one good man called Ishfaq Khattak, received a circular from headquarters in Lahore. It directed that all 'old items' whether crockery, furniture, locomotives, coaches or other machinery be collected and sold as scrap. And the faster that happened, the better. Another man with less interest in railway heritage would have complied post-haste. But not Khattak, for even before this deadly circular had arrived, he and his Divisional Transportation Manager (DTM), Hameed Razi, had started to put together a small collection of railway memorabilia.

The most notable in this collection was the handful of 100-year-old railway clocks, a number of lamps of various types and three narrow gauge railway coaches. There were other oddments as well. This little collection was put on display in the foyer of the DS office across the road from the Rawalpindi railway station. The coaches sat neatly in the garden outside. If the circular were followed in spirit, this collection was scrap — regardless of the fact that the clocks, lamps and telegraph system all worked perfectly — and should have been sold off by weight and the piddling amount deposited in the government treasury.

Ishfaq Khattak and Hameed Razi were not ready to surrender the little exhibition they had so painstakingly started and there initiated a process that has no parallels in the Byzantine maze of government working. Without a single meeting, without asking for funds and without one of those convoluted official letters that obfuscate more than they achieve, or preparing that notorious document, the PC-1, these two good men simply speeded up their collection. Every tour of inspection yielded something new from the bottom of some store or junkyard that no one had opened for the past few years. Within a matter of days and without even leaving the Rawalpindi railway division, these men had a respectable lit-

From the oblivion

The collection was soon bigger than the small space in the foyer and getting to be more and more like a museum display. A place was needed to put this up or someone following after Khattak's transfer would abide by the circular and scrap this priceless collection. Khattak and Razi cast about for a place. Golra, just a handful of kilometres from Rawalpindi station, fell nicely into the slot.

Built of limestone in 1882, the building was itself a protected monument. The west end of its platform has a line of lovely 100-year-old banyan trees all in a row while on the other end stand a few similarly planted pipals. This, says Khattak, is perhaps the only station anywhere

from Golra station. Elements in the architecture that would seem insignificant to anyone but the connoisseur show how the designer must have delighted in his work: the grey-brown shade of the sandstone; grey granite keystones in the arches and the course of green sandstone running all around the building just above a man's height and a similar course at the ventilator level. Beauty had not been sacrificed to functionality here.

The extension at the west end of the building was chosen to be the exhibition hall. Though it was originally a single room, it had, over time, been partitioned out to make a very warren of six tiny cubicles. The walls were knocked down and the ceiling

neglected. The Indian and in what that been easy that during who anti year And year dista — to again I was ing and



Crockery like they don't make anymore.



The two-blade fan

with these trees planted in such order. With its disintegrating timber porch, it had the right ambience. This was the place to house the exhibition. Now there was a collection of priceless railway antiques and a place to set up their exhibition, but there were still no funds to get the project going. Depending entirely on in-house human resource,

removed to reveal thousands of roosting bats, tons of swallow's nests and guano. While this work was in progress, the Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry contributed a load of marble flooring tiles for this room.

Meanwhile, the collection was steadily growing. From Rawalpindi division Khattak and

room and t vated the Khat began So fa prese every holds um p

On the brink of vion

neglected and forgotten Mari Indus in the Punjabi boondocks and from Peshawar. All were put in working order. It is just as well that railway service has always been a family affair and it was easy to find someone related to that old salt that repaired clocks during his 45 years with the railway. Or there was the man whose father worked with this antiquated equipment in the years just after independence. And so these men, pensioned off years ago, were called up from distant hamlets and put to work — to get these pieces going once again.

In record time the building was put in order. The disintegrating timber porch was righted and polished, the exhibition

chinaware with monograms, brass utensils from railway officers' saloons and dining car kitchens. It can scarce be expected of today's generation to know that there were once dining cars with mail and express trains and that the line connecting Peshawar with Lahore was once called Punjab Northern State Railway or PNSR for short. From some dusty storeroom Khattak and his merry band recovered an antiquated set of surgeon's instruments and even a carton full of raincoats.

Among these sits an old Token Machine with a thick layer of pale grey paint. It was appropriated from Khem Karan after that Indian town fell to the

now living in Karachi.

This was the key that could have opened the doors of the carriages crammed with refugees when it halted at the various stations on its long journey to the new country. But Major Rafi, who was placed in charge of the train, said he had been given no key. The doors could not be opened and those who had chosen to take this train came home safely. There seems to be no reason to doubt the major's story, and that he held on to this unique testimony of that violent time until September, fully 56 years, is as commendable as his willingness to bequeath it to the collection that is now called the Railway Heritage Point.

Outside, Golra railway station now looks as prim as it has not done for many decades. Platform lights that once burned paraffin now converted to electricity adorn the facade. Under the resorted timber porch the doors and windows, their coats of paint removed, once again flaunt their wooden texture and there hang on the walls black and white pictures of the early days of what was once a great railway system: North Western Railway. One restored waiting room is complete with dated furniture. Among these is the remarkable piece that was called 'Chair, Long Arm' in waiting room inventories. Since one could put one's legs up on the long arms,

without a break in rhythm.

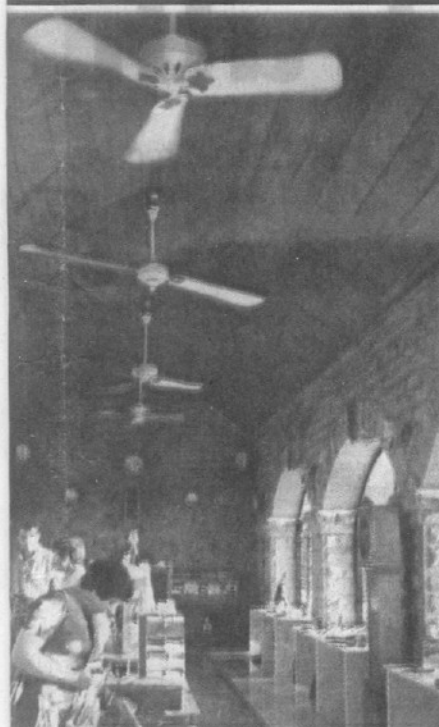
The east end of the platform is taken up by restored narrow and metre gauge rolling stock and steam locomotives. The pride of place here is taken up by the metre gauge saloon car with the lettering JR, for Jodhpur Railway, on its ivory-coloured walls. This was the royal saloon of the Maharana of Jodhpur. By some fluke of chance it got caught on the Pakistani side of the metre gauge network in Thar Desert at the time of independence. After some years of neglect at Mirpur Khas railway station, it was used as the DS's saloon on the metre gauge section to the Indian border as well as the loop around Mirpur Khas.

When I saw it several years ago, it was in a sorry state and I had despaired for it. But these good men have brought it back and so I suggested that this one together with the viceregal and other saloons (all on display) should be rented out as honeymoon suites. Besides other things, railway buffs do get married after all and what better way of beginning the new life than to the music of passing trains. It would be a treat to hear an occasional steam locomotive, but even the speeding diesels don't sound half bad.

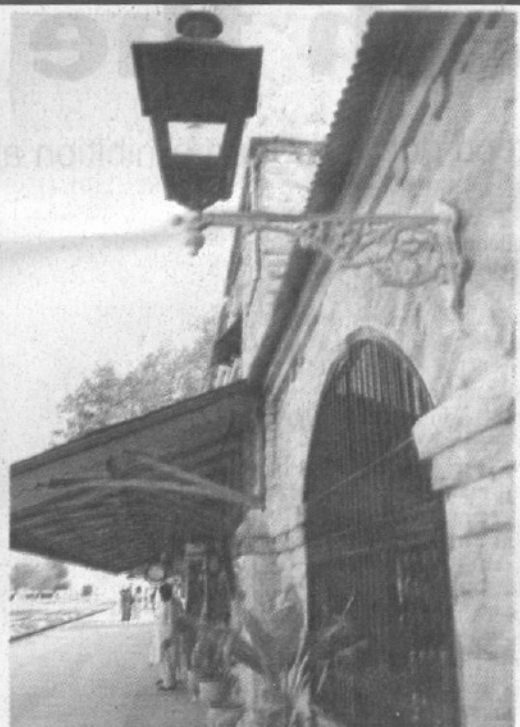
It is interesting to note that the enthusiasm of Ishaq Khattak and Hameed Razi was contagious. In the beginning colleagues volunteered collectibles and now when it came time to finally start the paper work, the Railway Board was most supportive of the effort. On October 17 the Board unanimously approved the proposal Khattak had prepared for the Railway Heritage Point at Golra. It is now under the wings of the Pakistan Railway Heritage Committee under the patronship of the Chairman of the Board. Now, even when Khattak and Razi are transferred, the collection at Golra will not be frittered away.

Permission has also been secured to set up a Pakistan Railway Heritage Fund. As of the past week adult visitors to the museum will be required to pay 10 rupees and half as much for students (all levels). Entry for foreigners will cost 100 rupees. A steam safari is also on offer. For 16,000 rupees a steam locomotive will haul two carriages (up to 150 passengers) to Golra and back. For twice that amount the train can be taken up to Taxila. This income will form the seed of the fund.

Ishaq Khattak says he and his team did not write a single letter when they began work on the project. Letter writing began only when the museum was just about ready to be inaugurated on September 26 (by the Minister for Railways). Nor too did they ask for funds. This shows that when a bunch of men is committed to achieving something, nothing, not even a paucity of funds, gets in the way. What



fans and clocks, all in working condition.



The north platform with a timber awning.

room fitted with marble flooring and the concrete platform renovated where it was damaged. By the beginning of September Khattak and his colleagues began arranging their museum. So faithful were these men in preserving railway heritage that every single table or rack that holds an exhibit is itself a museum piece — some dating back to the late 19th century.

The exhibits include electrical

Pakistan army in September 1965. Once upon a time this machine delivered the line-clear token to trains passing between Khem Karan and Gharyala stations. Perhaps the pride of place is taken by a nondescript piece of metal. Going by the script next to it, this is key that saved the lives of some 500 Muslim refugees coming home to Mr Jinnah's Pakistan from Jabalpur in India. When it first became

some rake of the Raj gave it the not entirely inappropriate name of Bombay Fornicator.

From the ceiling hangs the large cloth fan (*punka* in English pronunciation of the Raj) that once upon a time had a regular employed punka-puller. Usually young, uneducated boys, they would sit outside the room alternately pulling and releasing the cord to swing the fan. It has been reported that they became

a single meeting, without asking for funds and without one of those convoluted official letters that obfuscate more than they achieve, or preparing that notorious document, the PC-1, these two good men simply speeded up their collection. Every tour of inspection yielded something new from the bottom of some store or junkyard that no one had opened for the past few years. Within a matter of days and without even leaving the Rawalpindi railway division, these men had a respectable little heap of railway junk.

And a heap of junk was what it actually was: decades of disuse and neglect had turned everything grimy and unserviceable.

with these trees planted in such order. With its disintegrating timber porch, it had the right ambience. This was the place to house the exhibition. Now there was a collection of priceless railway antiques and a place to set up their exhibition, but there were still no funds to get the project going. Depending entirely on in-house human resource, Khattak and his team began work in July.

It took 15 days of sand-blasting to remove 50 years of diligent and repeated yellow-wash

removed to reveal thousands of roosting bats, tons of swallow's nests and guano. While this work was in progress, the Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry contributed a load of marble flooring tiles for this room.

Meanwhile, the collection was steadily growing. From Rawalpindi division Khattak and his colleagues extended their acquisition routine to all over Pakistan. Items came from as far away as Bostan north of Quetta, Mirpur Khas in southern Sindh,

room fitted with marble flooring and the concrete platform renovated where it was damaged. By the beginning of September Khattak and his colleagues began arranging their museum. So faithful were these men in preserving railway heritage that every single table or rack that holds an exhibit is itself a museum piece — some dating back to the late 19th century.

The exhibits include electrical meters, Morse keys, some of the earliest telephones used on what was once North Western Railway,

Pakistan army in September 1965. Once upon a time this machine delivered the line-clear token to trains passing between Khem Karan and Gharyala stations. Perhaps the pride of place is taken by a nondescript piece of metal. Going by the script next to it, this is key that saved the lives of some 500 Muslim refugees coming home to Mr Jinnah's Pakistan from Jabalpur in India. When it first became known that the museum was being set up, this key was sent in by S. M. Rafi, a retired major

some rake of the Raj gave it the not entirely inappropriate name of Bombay Fornicator.


From the ceiling hangs the large cloth fan (*punka* in English pronunciation of the Raj) that once upon a time had a regular employed punka-puller. Usually young, uneducated boys, they would sit outside the room alternately pulling and releasing the cord to swing the fan. It has been reported that they became so mechanical in their work that they could fall into a deep sleep and yet continue their pulling



Crockery like they don't make anymore.



The two-blade fans and clocks, all in working condition.



The north platform with a timber awning.

and back. For twice that amount the train can be taken up to Taxila. This income will form the seed of the fund.

Ishfaq Khattak says he and his team did not write a single letter when they began work on the project. Letter writing began only when the museum was just about ready to be inaugurated on September 26 (by the Minister for Railways). Nor too did they ask for funds. This shows that when a bunch of men is committed to achieving something, nothing, not even a paucity of funds, gets in the way. What Ishfaq Khattak and Hameed Razi did for the preservation of railway heritage is a beacon not just for railwaymen but for all of us.