

SHIKARPOOR: DE-SPIRITED AND DEFAMED

Waiting To Be Salvaged

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Abstract. The historic town of Shikarpoor in Upper Sindh, Pakistan, became an important commercial centre of the region due to its strategic geographic location, on the extensive network of trade routes connecting Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran with India. Shikarpoor served as a base for an enterprising community of Hindu merchants. The legacy of these infamous and affluent merchants is reflected through the remnants of the towns' historic fabric that speaks of a patronage for arts and building crafts. Shikarpoor was pushed into the abyss of decline owing to various developments of 19th century; most importantly among others the introduction of railways and mass exodus of Hindus at the time of India-Pakistan Partition. At present under threat of rapid demolitions and absence of effective measures for protection, this historic fabric is fast disappearing. Can mere gestures such as notification in 1998 as protected heritage under Sindh Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (1994) or inclusion in the WMF Watch List 2008, be sufficient to prevent this destruction? This paper attempts to focus on the significance of the town and addresses the issues of its rapid degeneration through interpretation of data collected for a research based documentation aimed at listing and inventory of the towns' historic places.

1. Historic Town of Shikarpoor: An Introduction

The town of Shikarpoor located at 68^o49'19.18" E and 24^o 44' 52.93" N, was established in 1617 A.D., by a tribe of Belooches known as Daoodpotras. It became the most important town in Sindh from the point of view of trade, commerce, banking and to a great extent political interests in the region, during the 18th and 19th centuries. Towards mid 18th century, it came under complete control of Afghans who encouraged Hindu merchants to settle here and carry on trade through Afghanistan to Central Asia and India. It soon became one of the two cities of Sindh, having a Hindu majority (other being the port town of Karachi), in otherwise a Muslim dominated region. The Hindu merchants of Shikarpoor developed their trade and banking networks in far flung areas, bringing an international repute and fame for their town. In spite of the fact that Shikarpoor never possessed the distinction of being a capital or seat of administrative power, it enjoyed an influential position in economics and political scene of the region from time of its creation till Partition in 1947.

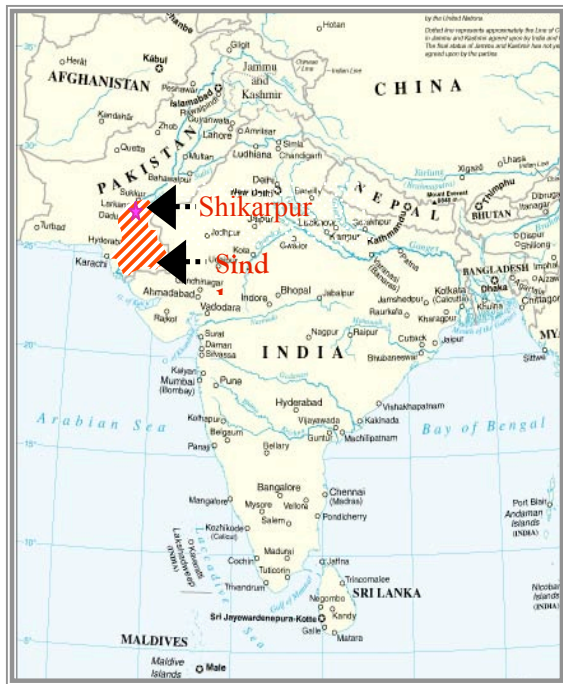


Figure 1. Location of Shikarpur in reference to the region.

The reflection of wealth and prosperity of Shikarpoor's inhabitants was expressed through its built environment, where the residential fabric got embellished with exclusively decorated 'havelis' and houses, and in later periods even with public buildings, from charitable and philanthropic contributions made by the affluent members of the society. Towards the end of 19th century Shikarpoor suffered a decline in its trade activities largely owing to the developments in communication links; most important being introduction of Railways (1858-61) and development of Karachi port (1870's), resulting in a shift of transportation means from caravans to railways and sea, thus redefining the trade hub for Sindh. The final blow to its prosperous times came with the mass exodus of its Hindu population in 1947

and its resulting demographic changes. Recognizing its importance as a historic town, the Ministry of Culture, Government of Sindh, in September 1998 notified 'Shikarpoor Historic Town' as a protected heritage under the Sindh Cultural Heritage Preservation Act of 1994. This official notification was meant to give legal protection to the city's historic fabric; however, its implementation has not been exercised in its true spirit. Concerned by an alarming rate of demolitions taking place within the city's historic core, it was nominated and thus included in the World Monuments Fund '2008 Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites'.

2. Historical Background

Towards mid 18th century Shikarpoor came under complete Afghan influence i.e. under the Kandahar State, and remained so for almost 77 years. During this period Hindu traders of India were encouraged to settle here, and soon made it their base, from where they developed an intensive network of trade, commerce and money lending. Richard Burton (1877) in 'Sindh Revisited' describes Shikarpoor as 'the capital of merchants, bankers and money changers' commenting that its '...position, south of the Bolan Pass ...made her the main entrepot of the Khorasan and Central Asian caravan-trade with Sindh and Western India'. Markovits (2000) refers to Shikarpoor being in the second half of the eighteenth century 'a kind of *bania* 'melting pot', where merchants of different origins established a residence and over times developed a very specific sense of identity'. These Hindu merchants made themselves quite indispensable in trade and financial transactions, as Postans (1843) remarks that '...so essentially necessary are they to the wild Turcoman, the rude Afghan, and even the blood thirsty Beluchi, that they are, with trifling exceptions, warmly protected'.

In 1824 A.D. the Talpur Mirs (rulers) of Sindh had a peaceful possession of Shikarpoor, however, required to pay an annual tribute to the Afghans. Irregularity in these payments caused frequent incursions on the town by the Afghans, claiming their arrears. This unstable situation of Shikarpoor, in otherwise quite controlled Sindhi domains, continued till 1834 A.D. Between 1825 till 1836 the Sikh Ruler, Ranjit Singh had a keen desire to annex the town to his territories. But by mid 1830's the British interest in Sindh increased due to prevailing political situation, and taking advantage of their influence on Ranjit Singh as an ally, after long and repeated negotiations they convinced him to keep his hands off Sindh and Shikarpoor. In 1839-40 A.D. during the Afghan military campaign the British troops used Shikarpoor as their military base, from where the supplies and other provisions were ensured for the sustenance of their army. Finally, in 1843 A.D. with the conquest of Sindh, Shikarpoor became part of the British Empire.

During the first two decades of their rule, the British saw Shikarpoor as an important city, making it the District Headquarter and a Military Cantonment. But 1860s onwards, the focus gradually shifted; Sukkur (in the south) and Jacobabad (in the north) superseded Shikarpoor as administrative and military base respectively. The Imperial Gazetteer of India (1908) indicates 'construction of the North-Western Railway and its extension to Quetta' as the cause for Shikarpoor's loss of commercial importance. But Markovits (2000) is of the opinion that the 'partition of 1947 ...[resulting in] massive exodus of Shikarpuri Hindus towards Bombay and other parts of India, ...[was] the death knell of a merchant community which, throughout the vicissitudes of a chequered history, always showed a capacity to rebound and to recreate itself'.

3. The Shikarpuri Merchants and their Network

Markovits (2000) traces the extents and influence of Shikarpoori Merchants' network extending to Kirman (in southeast Iran) as its westernmost outpost; Keria (in eastern Kashgaria) as its easternmost; Chimkent (in Turkestan) as the northernmost; and Aden (in Arabia) as its southernmost post. He describes it as a network that 'developed during the period of the rise of Durrani Afghan Empire, and consolidated itself in the Central Asian Khanates between 1800 and 1870'. According to him Shikarpooris played an important role in Russian Central Asia between 1880-1917, in Chinese Sinkiang and in southeastern Iran. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution these merchants suffered heavy losses, but on their return re-strengthened themselves and their network in India proper during 1920s and 1930s. Markovits identifies the period between 1917 – 1947, as the time when the 'Shikarpuri network went through a process of reorientation', when the surplus male population returning from Central Asia started to settle in Karachi and other localities in India. This in many ways laid the basis for post-1947 diaspora of this community of traders. Existing research on the *Bania* Hindus of Sindh has established that they became the main 'beneficiaries of the socio-economic transformation in Sindh during the British period' (Cheesman, 1982: Khuhro, 1999; Markovits, 2000).

Shikarpoor did not have much of its own manufactures, and could not compete with other trading and manufacturing centers of that time, but its merchants without doubt played a major role in distribution of the merchandize produced in those

emporiums to far off lands, by organizing and financing the caravan¹ trade from India to Khorasan. The forte of the city and its merchants as quoted by Thornton (1844) was ‘...banking and other branches of monetary traffic’, carried out through a very sophisticated system of ‘bills of exchange’ called *hundi* in local terms. For almost a period of one and a half century the banking houses of Shikarpoor ‘...came to dominate the financial transactions over a vast area comprising not only Afghanistan, but parts of Iran and Central Asia’ (Markovits, 2000). The *Hundis* were issued by Headquarters in Shikarpoor, and accepted throughout the vast region of the network, without question. These provided traders and travelers with a facility of safe carriage for their money in times when dangers of being looted on the way were very high. Thus, in spite of commission charged at almost as high as twenty to twenty five percent, these transactions were still acceptable as a more secure mode of money transfer. To maintain a monopoly, *hundis* were not circulated widely outside the Shikarpuri networks. Thornton (1855), mentioning credibility of these bills writes that they could be ‘...negotiated in every part of India and Central and Western Asia, from Astracan to Calcutta’. Burton (1877) gives a similar account saying that these bills could be ‘...discounted, without question or demur, in places distant a six months march’. *Hundis* were written in a script known only to the Sindhi Hindus containing ‘...marks which effectually prevent[ed] forgery ...[as they were] known only to the writer and to his correspondents’ (Burton, 1877; p252-253).

4. Sociological and Demographic Change

Towards mid 19th century Shikarpoor was among the largest towns of Sindh. Its census figures of 1850s show a 2/3 population belonging to the Hindu faith. India-Pakistan Divide of 1947 – was a major turning point in the history of Shikarpoor as mass exodus of its Hindu population created a void in the community based support system that provided educational, health, and other welfare related facilities on a philanthropic basis. Presently, according to the official census figures the percentage of Hindus in the city is less than 1.5%. A survey conducted in November 2007 for documenting and preparing inventory of surviving historic fabric of Shikarpoor, in addition to having data on the built fabric and its characteristic features, also included data on socio-economics of the residents. During this survey 78 Hindu families were interviewed as residents of the listed buildings, i.e. 24% of the total interviewed (333) households, reflecting upon the fact that Hindus still have a close association with the place.

The post-1947 socio-economic change is also explained by data collected on educational and professional background of present residents. More than 50% of interviewed households are associated with menial jobs or work on daily wages as laborers, vendors, etc., indicating that a majority of present population belongs to lower income bracket, having little or no education. This is further reinforced by data on property and assets of families, which shows that more than 75% families do not have any other property in the city or elsewhere.

Regarding residents’ association with the place, survey results indicate 60% of interviewed families having a long association of more than thirty five years. The

¹ Postans (1843), mentions that the ‘*Kaffilas*’ or caravans traveled from Kandahar in cold season reaching Shikarpoor in December and January and leaving around March. According to his estimate, upwards of 5000 camels, laden with merchandize, pursued that route in one year.

remaining 40% families are more recent migrants, with around 20% who have been there for less than 15 years. These recent migrants are mostly coming from rural areas. The post-independence demography of the town is explained by a present district revenue officer, as a transformation from the ‘commercial, civil and urban lines’ to ‘rural, feudal and tribal lines’.

Shikarpoor : Population Statistics				
	Year	Total	Hindus	Muslims
Pre-Colonial	1841 [•]	22,000		
	1851 [♣]	24,000		
	1854 [♦]	30,000	(20,000)	(10,000)
British Period	1872 [◇]	38,107	(23,167)	(14,908)
	1881 [◇]	42,496		
	1882 ⁺	43,000		
	1891 [◇]	42,004		
	1901 [◇]	49,491	63.8% (31,589)	35.97% (17,804)
	1911 [◇]	54,641		
	1921 [€]	55,503		
Post - Independence	1951 [*]	45,335		
	1961 [*]	53,910		
	1972 [*]	70,924	Figure not available	97.80%
	1981 [*]	88,138	1.37%	98.08%
	1998 [*]	1,34,883		
Source: [•] Postans (1841); [♣] (Burton (1851); [♦] Goldsmith (1854); [◇] Smyth, J. W. (1919); ⁺ Ross (1882); [€] Bombay Central Government, (1926); [*] Government of Pakistan Statistics Division Population Census Organization;				

TABLE 1. Population estimates and census figures for Shikarpoor

5. Historic Fabric of Shikarpoor

The physical form and growth pattern of Shikarpoor has been dominated by its political history and its position with reference to the terrain of the area. It was originally a walled city, built with burnt bricks, enclosing a space of 3,800 yards in circumference, having eight gated and guarded entry points. The last traces of the wall existed till late 19th century. The historic core within the walled limits, has narrow, winding streets and alleys. Its form and layout is well preserved, and even till today the inner streets can only accommodate pedestrian traffic. The dense built fabric is mostly of traditional architectural style, with constructions in timber, mud, and brick, however, this is rapidly changing and new constructions in cement concrete are increasingly replacing the traditional buildings. The built fabric of Shikarpoor is predominantly residential, except for the bazaar street which cuts across the centre of the walled area, along north-south axis. Streets having commercial activities, traditionally had a character and scale similar to the residential quarters. Large scale public buildings were introduced in Shikarpoor during the British reign.

Historic buildings of Shikarpoor identified for inclusion in inventory of protected heritage listing are mostly located within the walled city limits. These primarily consist of purely residential buildings (61%). In addition, some residential buildings have combined usage as residential-commercial (19%) and residential-temple (0.6%). These are followed by commercial buildings (9.5%) mostly shops located in the main bazaar street, religious buildings (4.5%) including 29 mosques, 17 temples and 4 shrines or tombs, civic amenities (2.5%) including cinemas, public hall, orphanage, old peoples' home, drinking water *sabeel*, police posts, library, railway station, educational buildings (1.4%) including schools/ colleges and health care facilities (0.5%) including hospitals, clinics and dispensaries². Most of these civic amenities and institutions were built by philanthropic contributions from the Hindu *Seths*, and still carry the name of their patrons, even though the administration of these establishments in most cases has changed hands. Many of these have undergone a change of use after 1947, as they were taken over by the Government of Pakistan, mostly for use as public amenities but not necessarily the same as the original one. Most common type of public buildings are the schools (sixteen of which are listed in the inventory). All of these have a colonnaded arcade and/ or veranda and placed within a compounded area having ample open spaces around the building/s. This form of public buildings on large plots was introduced into the fabric of Shikarpoor during the colonial period, in the later half of the 19th century.

The residential and religious buildings of Shikarpoor dominate the urban fabric of its historic core, and serve as the main features contributing to the essence and spirit of the place, reflecting upon the harmonic co-existence of the two dominant religious entities. Although this spirit was disturbed following Partition, but the remnants of these two building types even today are testimonies to the bygone times.

5.1. RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS: THE 'HAVELIS' OF SHIKARPOOR

The most characteristic feature of Shikarpoor's built fabric is its '*havelis*', mansions and houses. The residential unit became an expression of wealth for the merchants of Shikarpoor who employed master craftsmen to embellish their houses, especially during later half of the 19th century. Once this trend was introduced it gradually became a status symbol for influential and wealthy residents, both Hindus and

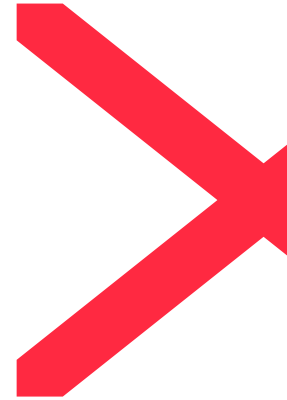


Figure 3. Map of Shikarpoor showing the extents and growth from the walled city the present day.

² Remaining percentage of enlisted properties include open spaces and natural/ environmental assets.

Muslim, who took this form of symbolic expressionism to an extreme, asserting their status and position in the society.

The general principles on which these residences were designed can be summarized as being planned around a central lounge, which usually opened onto an open courtyard, sometimes an arcaded verandah would act as a buffer between the interior space and the open courtyard, thus creating deep shadows to keep the interior cool. The ceilings were high, with a row of ventilators or open-work openings above the windows, allowing a good circulation of air. A double height lounge space on the ground floor was quite common, allowing visual link with upper floor. These traditional houses had extensive timber and metal decorative features on their facades. Their interiors were also rich in decorations, including colorful geometric flooring patterns, carved timber doors and cupboards, marble fire places, timber and glass decorations on ceilings, etc.

The concept of a '*haveli*' in Shikarpoor is of two types. First type, not very common, is the large house with a central courtyard and units for different families arranged around this central space. The second type, and more common format of a '*haveli*' in Shikarpoor is the one in which a row of small size dwellings open up on to a street, often a dead end street. This street has an entrance door at one end, where sometimes a small room or an open space, or a small shop might be provided, serving as a common meeting place for all the dwelling units on that street or '*haveli*' enclosure, where the residents could receive and meet any outsiders or visitors.



Figure 4. *Havelis* of Shikarpoor under threat due to neglect, abandonment, decay and demolitions.

5.2. RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS: MOSQUES AND TEMPLES

Other than the residential and commercial buildings, Shikarpoor's inner city is filled with numerous small mosques, and a close study of a map from 1915 reveals the same for temples, seventeen of which were identified during the survey and included in the list of historic buildings' inventory.

The temples in Shikarpoor are of three types: first is the large temple complex having several buildings within its compound, used for worship rituals as well as residential purpose; second type of temples are those placed inside a residential *haveli*, serving as a private temple for the families within, sometimes in the form of the conical '*shiwala*' placed in the courtyard or otherwise a small room on one side, reserved for worship and religious rituals; third type of temple is the isolated conical

pyramid-like structure, with a small chamber for offerings to the deity, present both inside the walled city area as well as along the road near the canal in the south of the city.



Figure 5. The surviving examples of the conical temple structures.

Similar to the numerous private temples (some of which do not exist any more), mosques in Shikarpur also follow the same pattern, with each street having a mosque of its own or sometimes even two mosques just a few paces away from each other. This particular pattern is contrary to the general belief of the faith which does not allow this type of fragmented and individual or small group prayers, and encourages collective prayer on at least a *mohalla* or neighborhood level. During the survey 135 mosques were marked most of which are inside the historic city core, out of these 29 have been included in the inventory of listed buildings. The remaining are either newly built or completely renovated without any traces left of the original old structure, thus not considered for protected heritage listing. Except for three or four large scale mosques the rest are very small in size. The pattern and format of these mosques, suggests as if these were built in competition to match the number of temples in the city.

6. Figurative Motifs and Ornamentation on Exteriors

The use of decorative ornamentation in timber, stucco and metal, is very extensive. The figurative, floral and geometric motifs used in various elements reflect upon the religious ideology of the inhabitants. The houses of Hindus have iconographic representation from their religious mythology, whereas those of Muslim residents make use of extensive geometric and floral motifs. The co-existence of both types of representations reflects upon a well balanced and harmonic presence of the two communities. In the earlier period buildings a very crude form of timber details are seen. But later period constructions have an



Figure 6. Carvings above an entrance door depicting the Hindu deity Ganesh.

extensive and elaborate use of timber details. Examples from late nineteenth and early twentieth century houses have facades completely covered with timber details including extensively carved doors, screens in wall openings, brackets supporting projecting upper floors and many other forms of decorations.

The commonly used external architectural features that contribute to the unique characteristic of Shikarpoor's historic fabric include ornately decorated balconies, windows, timber carved doors, roundels, etc. Colonnaded or arcaded porticos or verandahs also add to the architectural quality of many buildings. An extensive use of wrought/ cast iron grills and carved timber brackets, having various forms of figurative expressions add character to these historic buildings. Another common feature used in small residential units is the elaborate ornamentation of the entire façade with extensively carved timber elements.



Figure 7. Façade of a traditional residence completely adorned by fine details including screens, carvings and brackets made with timber.

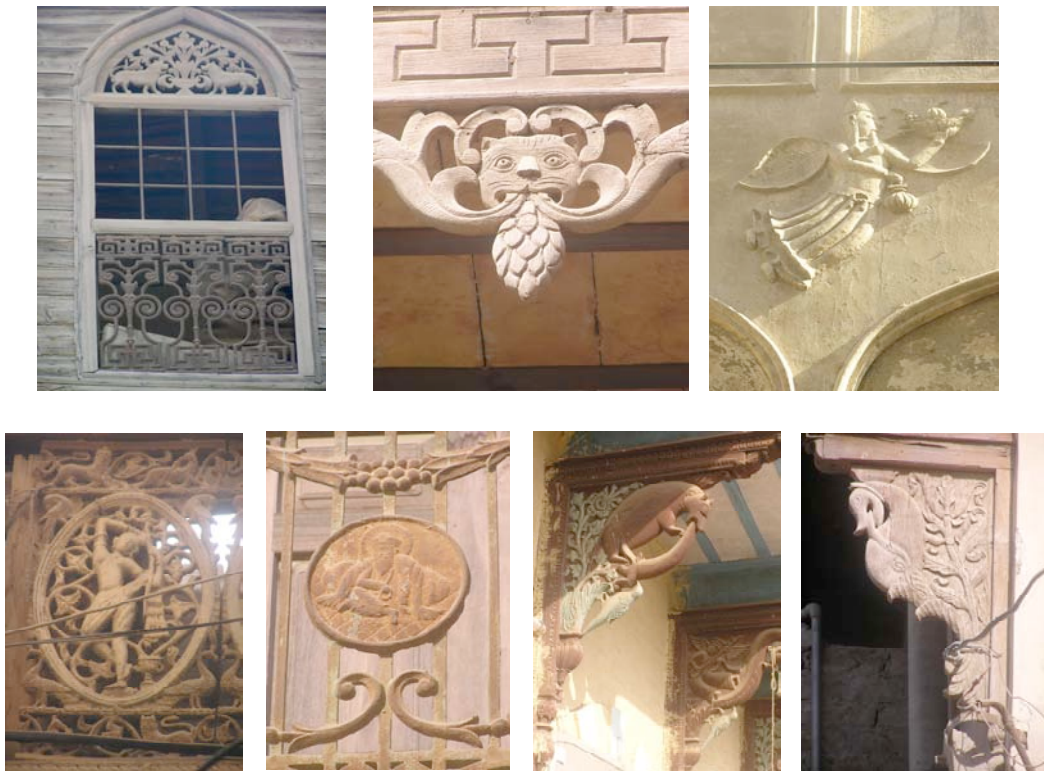


Figure 8. A few examples of the carvings and figurative motifs used in brackets, grills, windows, pelmets and stucco plaster.

7. Threats and Problems of the Historic Fabric

The historic town of Shikarpoor, although declared as a protected heritage and given legislative cover, still suffers from a rapid loss of its historic fabric due to ineffective planning and policies on part of the local government to support or encourage conservation. Main problems and threats, evident through the undertaken research are summarized as follows:

- **Demolitions:** Demolition of structures without any regard to their historic significance is a major threat, due to which many historic buildings have either already disappeared or are fast disappearing. The '*havelis*' are being replaced by new constructions. A major reason for these demolitions is the growing market and demand for the decorative features that adorn the traditional facades.
- **Under-utilization and Inappropriate Usage of Buildings:** Almost 18% of the listed buildings were found to be completely vacant and another 5% were fifty percent or more vacant. Many buildings were found to be in use only occasionally when their owners living in other cities come for short visits. Large scale public buildings such as *dharamsalas* and *musafirkahanas* or temple complexes, left abandoned for some time, are taken over by rural background inhabitants, encroaching the open spaces and using these for their livestock.
- **Lack of Development Investments:** In the post-Partition developments Shikarpoor did not get much importance, and remained unaffected by the rapid urbanization, expansion and population growth experienced by other cities of Sindh. The town has lost the patronage it previously received due to its influential residents, and lacks any development investments from private or public sectors after 1947.
- **Change from an urban to rural character and pattern:** Demographic change in the towns population has been a major factor in its transformation from an urban to a rural character. Since 1947, there seem to be two cycles of migrations; vacuum created by the Hindu exodus was filled in by the middle class mohajirs, who in pursuit of better job opportunities started to move out, and in the past two decades are being replaced by inhabitants coming in from rural areas having lesser level of education and belonging to lower income groups.
- **Degeneration of public, civic, institutional and recreational facilities:** Many institutions and public facilities in Shikarpoor were created through the donations and philanthropic contributions of its Hindu residents. This community based system of welfare collapsed completely after the departure of this community. The infrastructure left by these establishments is the only evidence of their existence. Many of these buildings have undergone a high degree of deterioration.
- **Neglect and Inadequate Maintenance:** Due to disuse and abandonment resulting in neglect and lack of maintenance, many properties have undergone heavy deterioration, thus under a high degree threat, needing immediate restorations to ensure their survival.

8. Conclusions

The historic city of Shikarpoor belongs to that category of settlements in Sindh which become a victim of neglect due to geo-political, physical and historic changes in the region. Shift of emphasis in trading and production patterns; creation of new communication and transportation links and abandonment of traditionally existing options; loss of internal revenue base at the local government level; migration of area elite to the new urban centers are the major reasons causing this degeneration. The process has continued over a sizable period of time, dating back its origin to the pre-partition history.

The socio-economics of Shikarpoor historically focused around trade and agriculture as the two main domains for income generation and professional pursuit. Prior to partition, trade and commerce had an upper edge due to a majority of merchants' community residing within the city. In the post partition scenario, this has changed completely. With migration of Hindus, trade and commerce activities no longer dominate, however agricultural activities have sustained and are the main source of economic sustenance. The demographic and socio-economic change has caused a complete transformation in the character of this important historic. The unique built fabric, lacking appreciation from its new inhabitants is rapidly disintegrating. The traditional architecture is being rapidly replaced by new constructions that lack the finesse of quality and architectural detail, so exceptionally used in traditional houses and other public buildings.

In the absence of previous documentation the extent of loss within the historic fabric cannot be quantified, but the documentation undertaken as part of this research can become a base for establishing the extent of surviving historic fabric. It can be used for developing plans and proposals for a possible re-generation of this important town which holds great significance in the regions' history. The inventory can serve as a tool for local authorities and administration to take actions for implementation of the legal protection already declared under legislative support. As a source of information it can be used effectively to build awareness at local level, encourage training of professionals and experts in the area of heritage conservation and help in development of a conservation plan or strategy for revival of the town and its unique historic fabric.

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