

3. ERODING HISTORIC TOWNSCAPES: A Case of Shikarpoor, Sindh

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Most historic cities and urban centers in Pakistan are today imperiled by overbearingly chaotic and unplanned developments; their stories of grandeur being constrained to historic chronicles/ travelogues, or reflected from the muffled on-site reminiscences of dilapidated and rapidly vanishing architectural masterpieces. A case in point is the town of Shikarpoor, Sindh; a primary pivot of trade and commerce on the extensive network of routes connecting Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran with India. Established in 1617AD, the town developed 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 has undergone major transformations, both in socio-economic and cultural aspects, negatively impacting the historic fabric - today jeopardized by lack of maintenance and rapid demolitions. Owing particularly to 19th and 20th century developments in Sindh the town is left under-resourced in offering economic incentives to sustain its resident communities. Taking notice of its threatened status, Shikarpoor was notified in 1998 as protected heritage under Sindh Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (1994). Furthermore, it was notified for inclusion in WMF Watch List 2008 and 2010. But mere notification has so far proved insufficient to prevent the ongoing destruction?

The paper summarizes, through a brief historical retrospect, the significance of Shikarpoor and its declined status due to societal transformations. An account on its surviving historic fabric aims to give insights on the built form traditions in Sindh, leading towards a summary of threats and problems today faced by such environments.