

REVIEW



For Srinagar's heritage structures, the agitators (above) whose images make it to the front pages daily are not as much a threat as rapacious developers. The historic Lal Ded Memorial School right), photographed by Saima Iqbal's Intach team in 2004, was razed to the ground by a builder for a commercial project.



KAUSHIK ROY

KASHMIR'S OTHER WAR

Young conservationists such as Saima Iqbal are fighting a losing battle to protect Srinagar's heritage

By Archana

FOR a generation of Indians far removed in time from the birth pangs of the nation, patriotism isn't something that they wear on their sleeves like their parents did. But if you're a 30-something Kashmiri, then the rules that apply to the young in the rest of the country don't hold good. Ask Saima Iqbal, and she'll tell you why.

With Kashmir dominating the headlines for all the wrong reasons, stories such as Saima's don't get heard. But here's a gutsy young woman who has opted to stay back in home town Srinagar, and not succumb to the lure of greener pastures outside the Valley, because she's working hard — and quietly — to save her state's architectural heritage from both rapacious developers and the Molotov cocktails of protestors.

The 34-year-old conservation architect employed with the Srinagar chapter of the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (Intach) has a different kind of struggle on her hands as she carries out her quiet campaign to restore bits of Kashmiri heritage that are crumbling either because of neglect, or because their owners have fled the state.

As we catch up with her on phone, Saima says she has been home-bound in Srinagar for a week because of the curfew. Mercifully, she had wrapped up the field work for her projects before the upsurge of violence in the Valley. Now, as Saima waits for the curfew to be lifted to allow her to go to office again, she uses her time by completing all pending desk work at home.

"Things were fine till the end of May this year. Then the disturbances began and they escalated by July," says Saima. She has a Bachelor's in Architecture from MSIA Bijapur, which is affiliated with Dharwar University, and a Master's in Historic Conservation from School of the Built Environment, Oxford Brookes University.

At the moment, INTACH Srinagar has three or four big projects on its drawing board. Additionally, it is involved in a number of minor projects. "Since 2009, we've been working on the restoration of seventeenth-century Thag Baba shrine in Srinagar, which was badly da-

maged in the 2005 earthquake, with assistance from the Prince Claus Fund of The Netherlands," Saima says. "We are also in the process of documenting all the shrines of Srinagar district, besides working on the restoration of the structures within the Nishat, Shalimar and Achchabal gardens developed by Mughal emperors."

The present projects of INTACH Srinagar follow a long and illustrious line of work undertaken by the organisation since its formation less than a decade ago. It began in 2003-2004 when Salim Beg, former director of Jammu & Kashmir Tourism, was appointed Intach convener for the state. He set up a team — besides Iqbal, it has Samir Hamdani, Abid Hussain and Jabeen Manzoor (who has since left) — for an assessment of Srinagar's architectural heritage. Iqbal says that it is because of Beg's persistent efforts that INTACH Srinagar has carried out some remarkable documentation and restoration work in the trouble-torn city.

In 2004, the team listed all the

historic buildings of Kashmir, both residential and commercial, and prepared a five-volume report. The work entailed walking through every lane and alley of the Srinagar's inner city, taking down notes on the buildings, talking to owners to find out about the historicity of the structures and taking pictures of the façades and the details. The project yielded more than 6,000 images of Srinagar's local architecture, many of which is going under bulldozers to be replaced by modern concrete monsters.

"We picked up as an organisation in 2005 and started getting more projects from the tourism depart-

ment," Saima says. "Our next big venture was the restoration of the Nishat, Shalimar and Achchabal gardens, following by the fifteenth-century Aali Masjid," she says.

The Aali Masjid is one of Srinagar's oldest mosques situated on the Idgah grounds, which frequently make news for being the venue of protests. The mosque was built 1471 by Sultan Hassan Shah of the local Shahmiri dynasty.

With the Valley on the boil, Intach's impressive conservation plans seem to have hit a road block, and Saima fear the long the violence continues, the more difficult it will get for the plans to fructify. "Earlier, we didn't face anything

“Earlier, we didn't face anything more serious than sporadic strikes. Last year was so busy that getting a Sunday off was a dream. But now our work has halted.”

— SAIMA IQBAL, Conservation Architect, Intach Srinagar



Saima Iqbal was educated in Karnataka and the UK but Srinagar is her first love



The pictures above are of the historic Aali Masjid on the Idgah Ground in Srinagar. This mosque was built in 1471 by Sultan Hassan Shah of the Shahmiri dynasty. Predominantly made of wood, the mosque had been disfigured by concrete add-ons over the years. Saima Iqbal and her Intach colleagues took up its restoration in 2005.

more serious than sporadic strikes that caused delays but didn't ground our work," Saima says. "Last year, in fact, was very busy for us and even getting an off on a Sunday used to be a dream. But now, we have come to a total halt now," she adds.

Despite the Valley being in flames, and brakes being applied on its work, the INTACH Srinagar team has learnt not to get disheartened easily. "We're locals and are used to this. More than anything else, when the curfew is lifted, it's the traffic and rush at Lal Chowk that causes impediments, for the entire town descends on this square to shop," Saima says good-humouredly.

Her optimism is an example of what keeps the state chugging along despite the disgruntlement on the streets. The only dark cloud on the horizon of hope is the fear that if the situation on the ground doesn't change for the better, the efforts of young people like Saima may just get wasted.

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