



CONSERVATION SAIMA IQBAL

# The Heritage Warrior

TEXT: NASEER AHMAD

**A young architect makes conservation part of the development discourse of the State**

Most architects like nothing more than to talk about their buildings, plodding through PowerPoint presentations to show off their new constructions. But there are a few who believe that preserving historical buildings is a way to honour the past and define the future. Thirty-four-year-old Saima Iqbal belongs to the later category. In the face of inflation, apathy, neglect and uncertain times, Iqbal, Kashmir's only conservation architect, is determined to document and restore the diverse architectural history of Jammu and Kashmir. "The architecture of this state is unique. It has features of the Hindu period – typified by the massive stone temples like Martand, Awantipur, Naranga – the Muslim period and to some extent the Buddhist period."

Speaking from a cramped one-room office of the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in Srinagar's Press Enclave area, Iqbal, together with six others, is diligently classifying hundreds of heritage monuments and buildings that dot Jammu and Kashmir, including 70 monuments protected by the Centre and 26 monuments protected by the State. Srinagar itself has 838 listed properties, though only 18 fall in a Grade 1 classification and enjoy legal protection.

On any given day locals will see Iqbal with her short-cropped hair, laden with papers and a camera taking notes and pictures and red-flagging problem areas. It was as a student at Presentation Convent, the Valley's premier missionary school, that young Iqbal dreamt of becoming an architect. She recalls endlessly drawing sketches of houses, buildings, rivers and mountains while her father Zafar Iqbal, who was with the Military Engineering Services, would travel the State building



PHOTO: JAVID DNR

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PHOTO: ANIL DIXI

bridges. Having graduated in architecture in 1999 from MSIA, Bijapur she returned home and started work with some local architects. But she wanted something more than simply overlapping bricks with mortar.

Soon soul mates Sameer Hamdani, Jabeen Mehjoor and Abid Hussain Khan joined up and in 2004 the quartet established the INTACH chapter of Jammu and Kashmir. Later, Saleem Beg, whose expertise in heritage conservation made him the natural choice to head the chapter, joined in. “Saima was the first professional to join the campaign. Her efforts and that of her team have made conservation and heritage part of the development discourse of the State,” admits Beg.

The first major project the team undertook was the cultural mapping of 1,600 year-old Srinagar especially its downtown areas which contain 250 historical monuments within a 3km area. The heritage warriors went street by winding street, listing buildings, bridges, mosques, shrines and temples; dividing the area into heritage zones. The initiative was not easy. One day a man followed Iqbal upto her office threatening police action against the architect who, he thought, was taking photographs of his house to get a bank loan.

Eventually an exhaustive inventory of heritage buildings made its way into a five-volume book, *Cultural Resource Mapping of Srinagar City*. The widely acclaimed tome, now condensed into two volumes, is the only historical database available on the heritage

buildings of Srinagar. Another precious project has been the Aali Masjid, the second largest mosque in Srinagar after Jamia Mosque. Constructed in 1471 AD, during the rule of Sultan Hassan Shah, the mosque located near Eidgah in the Old City has been renovated becoming one of the best examples of Kashmir’s vernacular wooden architecture. The history of the mosque corresponds to four distinct political rules — the Sultanate, Mughals, Afghans and the Dogra periods during which the last known renovation was undertaken. “It was very rewarding. We actually worked with masons and carpenters to finish this INTACH project,” she says proudly.

Presently, Iqbal is working round the clock to include the Valley’s six Mughal Gardens — Nishat, Shalimar, Achabal, Chashma Shahi, Pari Mahal and Verinag — in UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites. The listing will help Kashmir become a global tourism destination.

Even with an M.Sc in Historical Conservation from Oxford, Iqbal is sure she does not want to leave Srinagar for better prospects. “I have never thought of leaving Kashmir. As an architect, there may be better opportunities outside and a lot more money but moving out is not an option.” Out of the original team, two have already left but for the indefatigable Iqbal, “There is too much to be done here.” Clearly, Iqbal’s journey of discovery has only just begun. ■

*More on Saima Iqbal at [www.intach.org](http://www.intach.org)*