Chapter- III
Street, Neighbourhoods and Muhallas
CHAPTER 3

STREET, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND MUHALLAS

The accounts of European travellers and merchants who visited Agra make it clear that the city of Agra generally had narrow roads and street-networks. If Pelsaert says that these roads were ‘without any regular plan’,¹ others found them narrow, dirty and crowded.² Such congested streets of Agra disturbed not only the foreign visitors but Jahangir as well. Thus at one place in his Memoirs, he notes that ‘it is not without the utmost difficulty the people can pass and repass along the streets.’³ François Bernier’s description of Agra roads and streets however, is much more explanatory and detailed. Comparing the towns of Agra and Delhi, he at one place notes:

“… It (Agra) wants the uniform and wide streets that so eminently distinguish Delhi. Four or five of the streets, where trade is the principal occupation, are of great length and the houses tolerably good; nearly all the others are short, narrow and irregular and full of windings and corners...”⁴

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¹ Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India or The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, tr. by W.H. Moreland & P. Geyl, Delhi, 1972, p. 1
³ *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, ed. Saiyid Ahmad, Ghazipur & Aligarh, 1863-64, p. 2
The import of Bernier’s statement becomes clear when we find the city was abandoned as a capital in farm of Delhi as Shahjahan found the streets of Agra too narrow for imperial processions.\(^5\)

As we have already mentioned that initially the town was not surrounded by fortification walls, but was defended only with a ditch running all around.\(^6\) However, if we believe William Finch, the traveller who visited Agra between 1583-1619, the city was even then provided with ‘six gates’\(^7\) which probably marked the axial roads which emanating from various directions culminated at the fort.

A large number of road networks including lanes and bye-lanes have been depicted on the Jaipur City Palace Museum Map of 1720’s (Map IA). A look at this map demonstrates that the picture of the streets of Agra drawn by Bernier during the reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb was still true for the first half of the eighteenth century. It depicts three to four main roads winding their way from the octagonal Badshāhi Chowk in front of the Delhi Gate of the fort and radiating in different directions and passing out of the city through its gates. Some of the other roads and streets are shown termination at structures, which probably were the mansions of important nobles.

From the said map it also appears that a road each in the north and south of the town run parallel to the city walls, to which were joined the various

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\(^6\) See Supra, Chapter on Settlement Pattern.

\(^7\) William Finch, *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*, ed. W. Foster, New Delhi, 1968, p. 75
roads emanating from the numerous city gates piercing the encompassing city walls. These lateral roads were probably contemporary to the city walls built by Sawai Jai Singh during his governorship.

A number of roads and lanes are also show to open up to the water front. It is however remarkable to note that there is no road depicted which run parallel to the river, as it does today (Map IV, see also Map IA).

Further, what is quite remarkable to note is that none of the roads at Agra run a straight course, except the road in the south which is shown running east-west, parallel to the city walls.

This network of ‘winding’ roads divided the whole town into various units of varied sizes, some dominated by the mansion of an important person (presumably a noble) or a market. It were these ‘units’ formed by intersecting roads, lanes and bye-lanes which constituted the various muhallas, puras, and katras of Agra, which are now commonly nomeclated as neighbourhood or localities.

Generally in a typical Indian town during the medieval period, there was a tendency of areas close to the political power—the court—being exclusively inhabited by the religious and political elites, the ulema, mashaikh and the nobles. The menial and labouring classes were pushed to the peripheral areas, which the intermediate areas were taken up by the people belonging to ‘classes’ between the elite and the menial- the so-called middling classes like the lower bureaucrats, petty traders and merchants and professionals. It has also been remarked that although the cities grew fairly freely, yet they followed the logic
of the caste or professional hierarchy: the prevailing tendency was of people of same ethnic affiliations to live in the same neighbourhoods. The urban units or wards thus formed, were known as *muhallas*. These homogenous units were also sometimes defined by cultural as well as socio-economic activities.

Another such exclusive and homogenous was *pura* or localities, generally in the suburbs inhabited by either one class of or people, else populated by a single but powerful individual.

The *muhalla* or a *pura* could be founded by a powerful noble or military commander. It could grow around, and as a result of the mansion of a noble or the hospice of a saint. Contrarily it could be a place exclusively inhabited by the people of one ethnicity, community or profession. Thus one could have *muhalla Ahangarān* (locality of Ironsmiths), or Balochpura (locality of Baloch inhabitants) Wazirpura (locality of Wazir Khan) or Muhalla Saʿadullah Khan (Map V).

Then there were certain neighbourhoods which grew around, or as a result of, certain market or commodity. Such neighbourhoods were known as *katra*. Such neighbourhoods in the beginning usually were places inhabited by a noble and his officials together with their households and followers.⁸ For catering to the needs of these people, there was a tendency for a gradual growth of a small market, which as time elapsed usually transformed into big marketing complex, where goods of all kinds from different corners of the

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⁸ H. H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, Delhi, 1968, p. 269; See also M. P. Singh, *Town, Market, Mint and Port in the Mughal Empire, 1556-1707*, New Delhi, 1985
These katras, or residential-cum-market complexes, could acquire their names, as in the case of *Muhallas* and *Puras*, after the names of nobles who were responsible for founding them or else they could acquire their names from the commodities sold or manufactured there.  

Unfortunately, except for a few strong references, our contemporary sources are generally silent as regards the settlements patterns and neighbourhoods of Agra. However some insightful information is provided to us which may help in a reconstruction of the morphology of this town. We have already quoted Pelsaert in an earlier Chapter where he remarked that the narrow breadth of the city was ‘because every one has tried to be close to the river bank.’  

Thus according to him the water-front was generally inhabited by the nobles and grandees of the empire. It was the zone of the elites and nobility. However from the second remark of Pelsaert it also becomes apparent that the zone of the high nobility was not confined only to the riverfront. Pelsaert noted that with the sudden growth of Agra under Akbar, ‘everyone acquired and purchased the plot of land’ wherever available resulting in Hindus mingling with Muslims and the rich with the poor.  

What Pelsaert fails to mention is that the mixing of the rich with the poor was due to the fact that the *haveli* or mansion of a noble would act as a nuclie for the service-class, the retainers of

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10 Wilson, op. cit. p. 269
11 Pelsaert, op. cit. pp. 1-2
the noble, the workers in the noble’s kārkhana and other dependents to settle in the area around the haveli or noble’s establishment. This would thus overtime result in the foundation of a Muhalla or a Katra.

Apart from the main town, each medieval city like, Agra or Delhi also had populated areas beyond their city walls. These suburbs were generally known as pura. Such suburbs would come into existence with the growth in population levels and a consequent shrinkage in available residential space within the city. The congestion of the city would also sometimes push the elite and nobles to build their mansions outside the city limits. They would then attract their retainers there and within no time colonies or puras would arise which would have the name of their originator. These suburbs, according to Abul Fazl had “all the requisites of a city”.

The Jaipur City Palace Map of 1720 depicts a number of such puras or suburbs. Three are located on the south-western corner, two in the north and one in north-east. We know that during his governorship Sawai Jai Singh had founded a locality in his own name, the Jai Singh Pura. Was it the one located on the right bank of the river in the north outside the city walls? We know from the Map that the garden of his deputy Rai Shivdas (no. 42 on Map II) is also located towards this side. The Chhatri or memorial pavilion of Raja Jaswant Singh (no. 45 on Map II) is also towards this end. The suburb depicted therein

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13 For details of such pura or suburbs see Khwaja Nizamuddin Ahmad, Tabaqat-i Akbari, Vol. II, pp. 281, 287; Sujan Rai Bhandari, Khulasat ut Tawarikh, tr. J. N. Sarkar, Calcutta, 1901, p. 56; Badauni, op. cit. II, 302

appears to be walled and comprising a long street lined with shops (?) and culminating as two almost square structures, probably the haveli of the Raja. Is this the modern Rajware on the modern maps? (Map V).

A look at any modern map of Agra would show Khawaspura and Sultanpura to the south-west of the town. Were it these two puras depicted in the City Palace Map which are shown as roads ending at large complexes?

The largest of Agra’s suburbs, the locality of Sikandara, however is not depicted on this map. Known for the Tomb of Akbar, the area is replete with a number of ruined Lodi structures, both residential and non-residential, which include ‘villas and pavilions which lined the river front, of which almost nothing is known’ now.15 It was probably in this area that the river front residences of Shaikh Zain Khan, Yunus ‘Ali, Khalifa and other nobles mentioned in Baburnama were located.16 Thus it is no surprise that a vast area to the east of Sikandara is today is known as Babarpur (Map V).

Within the city, apart from the muhallas or localities developing around noble’s mansions (and thus being inhabited by people of different faiths, castes and professions) there were exclusive localities inhabited by people profession similar crafts. Thus merchants, craftsmen, professionals and labourers had their distinct areas. We come across several such localities known after the principal crafts or castes of profession men who lived there or after particular

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commodities sold in it. Thus according to the *Agra ri Gajal* composed by Laxmi Chand around 1722-23 the *muhalla* of the sweetmeat sellers in the heart of the town at some distance of their market and shops. Likewise the Jain merchants too had their residential neighbourhood near the *bazars*. Their locality was known as *Muhalla Raushan*. Laxmi Chand further informs that ‘there were innumerable houses of merchants (jewelers?) near the Jauhari Bazar in the heart of the city. On the other side of the *Chahārsuq Bazar* and the octagonal Badshahi Chowk were the houses of ‘the cloth merchants and the mansions of the nobles’. Naturally, this was the area near the river side. Other *Muhallas* and localities mentioned in this versified account of Agra as the *Chhipipāra* (the locality of Paper Manufacturers & Painters), *Chirimārtola* (the locality of bird catchers) and Loha Mandi where the iron merchants not only sold their merchandize but also lived.

Similar information is got from a late eighteenth & early nineteenth century description of the city of Agra. Thus according to Manik Chand the city comprised of *Muhallas* like Loha gali (Iron Street, inhabited by blacksmiths), Chhāpitola (probably the same as *Chhipipāra* of Laxmi Chand), Chīnītola (sugar sellers locality),\(^{17}\) Katra Agha Baqir, Katra I’tībar Khan, Katra Shaista Khan and Katra Mardān Khan.\(^{18}\) According to Saud Ahmad Marohravi, in the pre-1857 period, the big and small *Muhallas* in Agra totaled 308. Further according to him the various localities continuing from the seventeenth century included Muhallas like: (1) Shahi Madrasa (Akbar’s reign); (2) *Pratāp pura*

\(^{17}\) Manik Chand, *Ahwāl-i Shahr-i Akbarabad*, MS. Or. 2030, ff. 58(a), 54(a)  
\(^{18}\) *Ibid*, ff. 54-55
(founded by Pratap Singh son of Raja Man Singh); (3) Jai Singh pura (of Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber); (4) Zain Khana (founded by Zain Khan Koka); (5) Sultanganj; (6) Sultanpura (both founded as suburbs by Sultan Parvez, the son of Hahangir); (7) Shahganj (Shahjahan’s period); (8) Katra Wazir Khan (founded by Wazir Khan the physician of Shahjahan) (9) Bagh Muzaffar Khan (a mhalla at the site of a Akbari noble of that name); (10) Chhatri (or site) Khana (founded by Satim Nisa Khanam); (11) Katra Khan-i Khanan (probably around the haveli of Abdur Rahim Khan-i Khanan); (12) Mandi Saiyid Khan (Saiyid Khan Chaghta, a noble of Akbar), (13) Shahzadi Mandi (named after Jahanara Begum); (14) Tila Ajmeri Khan (said to belong to Akbar’s period); Muhalla Qandhari (probably named after Qandhari Begum, wife of Shahjahan) and (14) Qutlupur (Akbar’s period).

It is interesting to note that till the 1720s the left bank of the river had a very sparse population with only katra Wazir Khan, Nawalganj (or the suburbs and market of Nawab Salabat Khan) and the Shaikhpura (now known as Kachhpura) depicted and mentioned on that side. The map of 1720s depict a solitary sarai near the Katra Wazir Ganj signifying that area was treated as an outskirt and not a part of the main city.

It is also important to note that by eighteenth century many market places were also transformed into residential area. We have the testimony of

Bernier that during the Mughal period it was a tendency of many merchants to have their residences on top of their shops.\textsuperscript{20}

This phenomenon of the conversion of purely non-residential and mercantile into residential localities is encountered in the Mumtazabad area of Agra. This was an area which had developed around the mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal during the reign of Shahjahan.\textsuperscript{21}

The plan of the Taj Mahal (the mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal) included not only the tomb but a complex subsidiary structures which were all ordered to be built by Shahjahan (see plan of Mumtazabad \textbf{Plan 3.1}). Thus an entire complex of \textit{sarais}, mosques and other buildings were built along with the mausoleum under the supervision of Makramat Khan and Abdul Karim at a total cost of about 50 lakh rupees.\textsuperscript{22} None of these sources mention the settlement pattern of the area, nor the four \textit{katras} of Mumtazabad. On the contrary, reference is made to four \textit{sarais} which presumably at some later date were converted into markets. However we are informed by Lahori that behind these royal \textit{sarais}, ‘wealthy merchants’ built their houses and their structures, thus converting the whole area into vast residential neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{23}

According to the local traditions, the area around Katra Phulail (situated on the south-east of the \textit{Jilaukhana}) was inhabited by those who traded in or manufactured scents.

\textsuperscript{20} Berneir, op. cit., pp. 245-46.


\textsuperscript{22} Abdul Hamid Lahori, op. cit., II, 1872, pp. 324-30.

\textsuperscript{23} See Ibid, p. 329.
The octagonal open space between the four original *sarais*, now known as *katras*, was subsequently given (or acquired?) to the family of the Qazi of Tajganj, and thus was converted into *Muhalla Qazian*. According to another tradition, as the area was dominated by paper-manufacturers during the eighteenth century, it got converted to *muhalla Kaghaziant*. Similarly around *katra* Resham (see map of Mumtazabad) were inhabited cloth merchants and other traders doing business in raw silk brought from Bengal. This *katra* has a Jain temple and a mosque dateable to Aurangzeb’s reign: probably reflecting the character of the place during the seventeenth century.

*Katra* Jogidas (to the east of the *katra* Resham) was (and is) inhabited exclusively by the Hindus, mainly Brahamns, besides the Baniyas and some Jains.

To the south-east of the Taj complex is situated the *Muhalla Pāktola*, inhabited by Kayasthas. According to a local tradition, it was in this neighbourhood that Todar Das, the treasure of Shahjahan allegedly, lived. Muhalla Tulsi Chabutara situated on the north-east of Paktola was inhabited by *kolis, mihtars* and other such lowly castes. *Telipara* and *Muhalla Billochpura* are in the vicinity of Besai Kalan.

To the west of *Muhalla Paktola* is *Muhalla Impeypura*, now popularly known as *Gummat* or *Gumbad*. *Muhalla Garhiyan*, inhabited by a predominantly Muslim population is situated adjacent to *Muhalla Gummat*.

Thus we see that the area, which probably was one of the last to develop after the building of Taj Mahal and the shift of capital to Shahjahanabad was an
area was densely populated with a cross-section of people belonging to various professions and creeds. Professionals, merchants and men of high birth and offices were contained within the confines of a large ‘suburb’ which then was divided between them on caste and professional divisions. This fact is testified not only by a depiction of dense population on the Jaipur City Palace Museum Map of 1720, but also by Peter Mundy who observe:

“He (Shahjahan) intends, as same think, to remove all the cittie higher causening hills to be made levell because they might not hinder the prospect of it, places appointed for streets, shops etc. dwelling commaunding merchants, shopkeepers, artificers to inhabited (it) where they began to repair and called by her name Tage Gunj”.”

Map IV

ROAD NETWORK DEPICTED IN MAP OF 1720'S