

'Kacha kot' that became Lahore

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OUR search for the origins of the original Lahore has immense twists and turns. It's time period can be anything starting 2,000 BC onwards... at least carbon dating evidence of archaeological findings in the Lahore Fort do suggest this time period. We learn from various sources that Lahore had many names, all of which changed over time. But the one name that does warrant research is 'kacha kot'.

One of the two most probably sites of the 'original' Lahore is Mohallah Maulian. Let us explore this area in this brief piece. If we focus on Sootar Mandi — the yarn market — inside Lohari Gate, we can get a feel of what we are looking for. Sootar Mandi was once called Mohallah Chaileywala Hammam, and is located in what was once called Machli Hatta Gulzar, which is just off Chowk Chalka, Lahore's original red-light area. As late as 1864, according to one source quoting Mufti Tajuddin, son of the well-known Mufti Imamuddin, the Lohari Mandi area was known among the old folk of the Walled City as 'kacha kot' — the mud fort. Why was this area called a 'mud fort' when we know that the original walls of the Lahore Fort, before Akbar the Great's days, were also made of mud? This is the question that must be explored.

To determine this it is important that

one visits the old Walled City, observe the gradient of the land, the water (nullah's act as excellent guides of gradient and direction) flow and observe how 'mohallahs' and 'kuchas' and 'kattrahs' are structured. On Sundays, this is my favourite pastime. Standing at Chowk Sootar Mandi, if you observe the curve of Gali Pir Bola as it merges with Waachowali Bazaar, and then also the Lohari Bazaar where it merges with Chowk Lohari Mandi, and, lastly, where Chowk Mati where it merges with Papar Mandi, you can well imagine. If you close your eyes and transport yourself 3,500 years back, a small mud fort with a small dwelling. The setting is perfect. Once you open your eyes, it is time to observe, or look for, some evidence of a mud fort.

If you walk along Lohari Bazaar, just a short distance from Chowk Chalka (Imagine, this beautiful name has been changed to a pious Chowk Bokhari!) to the right you will see the street open a little, for on the right is a half-buried archway of 'pucca' bricks and mud. Could this be from the era when Lahore was a mud fort? The evidence certainly does suggest that this could be an archway, or gateway, of the small original 'kacha kot' way back in time, a place that was to grow one day to become Lahore.

It is also possible, for we must not

exclude any possibility, that this was the famous mud fort that was built by Malik Ayaz, the very first Muslim governor of Lahore. This is very probably because it is recorded history that Lohari Gate was the main entrance to Ayaz's mud fort. So no matter how you analyze recorded evidence, one thing is for sure, and that is that Chowk Sootar Mandi was one important centre of Kacha Kot. The lay of the streets also suggest the boundaries.

In an earlier piece we had followed a similar theory, and come up with the proposition that during the times of Mughal Emperor Akbar, the original wall of the Walled City of Lahore was, on the western side, to the right of Bazaar Hakeeman in Bhati Gate, and on the eastern side to the left of Shahalam Gate, which then curved eastwards and formed a 'kidney shaped' city that depended on the flow of the curving River Ravi. Thus the Lahore of the 'kacha kot' era has continued to expand in three major leaps of expansion, each with an almost 400-year gap. The eras of Raja Jaipal of Akbar and of Maharajah Ranjit Singh mark the high points of this expansion.

But the expanding bubble definitely has its origins in three factors, they being (a) the way the Ravi has flown and how and when it has been changing its course,

(b) the existence of the Lahore Fort and how power has flowed from the rulers, and (c) the manner in which the population and economy of the old original Walled City has changed over time, grown, or even shrunk, depending of invasions, droughts and famines in the countryside. The story of 'kacha kot' has been determined by these factors.

When walking through these streets, it is not hard to make out that the oldest buildings in the entire Walled City exist in this area. As one passes the old exquisite mosque known even now as Masjid Kohana Hammam Chaileywala, one is reminded that the area was named similarly once. There must have been a huge 'hammam' here once. The tomb of Pir Bola exists after which is named the 'gali'.

It is sad that we tend to change the names of streets and areas, and even cities, at the drop of a hat as if to stamp some sort of moral authority on time. All rulers love to block out history. It would be best to let history rest and emerge as times dictate. It would not be a bad idea to declare the entire Walled City as a protected area. Let us keep for the future the little that is left of 'kacha kot' — the mud fort that ultimately became the Walled City of Lahore.—MAJID SHEIKH