

Lahore without its celebrated walls

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5/3/05*

WE call our city the 'ancient walled city of Lahore', yet very few of us know that the bricked walls of this city are really not all that ancient. Yet, they are old, very old, but the bricked walls of the city have a history all their own.

It is important to know that the shape, size and walls of the old city have been changing all the time. In the old walled city there are three basic high points, in the topographical sense, they being the Lahore Fort, the Langa Mandi area, and the Mohalla Maulian, just to the north of Bazaar Mati. The fort is definitely the highest point, with the Langa Mandi mound being the highest point in the old walled city. This area is marked, on the southern side by the Gumti Bazaar merging into Said Mittha Bazaar. You will notice that these are semi-circular streets merging in to one another. The word 'gumti' itself means a curved street. Even the word 'langa' means a thoroughfare.

A study of the streets makes it clear that the Langa Mandi settlement developed, over time, in layers. This could be the very earliest settlement outside the Lahore Fort. The area being the highest point in the entire walled city, it is regarded by experts and archaeologists as the potential site for the very first settlement of Lahore outside the fort. The area to the west of Langa Mandi takes us to the mound we today call Tibbi, originally called a *tibba*-a mound. To the south is Tehsil Bazaar. To the north is the fort. This area of Langa Mandi and Tibbi-Tehsil Bazaar can be said to be the original ancient Lahore.

The walls of the Lahore Fort were, till the time of Akbar the Great (1556-1605) built of mud. "The thickness of the mud walls of the Lahore Fort are said to have been wide enough for horses to run on" as the historian Sujana Rai said writing in 1695. Like the fort there is some evidence to suggest that the mud walls curved to enclose the inhabited areas of Langa Mandi and Tibbi. If this explanation is accepted, and many do not accept this 'creeping theory' about ancient Lahore, then the very first walled city of Lahore was a mud-wall enclosed area just to the south of the fort with Tehsil-Gumti Bazaars being

on its southern-most end, and curving in to meet in an oblong shaped citadel just to the south of the Lahore fort walls.

Over time we see more settlement outside this enclosure coming up. The earliest settlements can be traced to inside Lohari Gate, just along the road leading from the south to this enclosed settlement. We see that over time this settlement expanded to enclose the entire area starting from Lohari Gate, probably the oldest gate of the ancient walled city, enclosed on the west by a wall to the east of Bazaar Hakeeman and on the eastern side by a wall just to the west of the main Shahalami Bazaar leading right up to Rang Mahal and heading towards the fort.

This huge settlement is the original ancient walled city of Lahore, the one referred to by Ptolemy in AD150 as the abode of Lavalke or Labokala. The popular legend of Raja Ram Chandra, of Sita, of Laho and Kasu, as first referred to by Sujana Rai, basically referred to popular folklore about the origins of the ancient temple of Lahu, now inside the Lahore Fort. It goes without saying that even 2,000 years ago, the mud-walled city of Lahore, and its mud-walled fort, was a major city (shehr) of the sub-continent, located as it was on the banks of the curving Iravah River, or the Ravi.

The numerous caravans that came to Lahore all camped outside the ancient mud-walled city of Lahore on the eastern side. As a major trading city developed a huge settlement began to form just to the east of the mud walls. These traders complained of dacoits harassing them at night, as is mentioned in "*Haddood-i-Alam*" in AD 982. During this time period small settlements were coming up all along the eastern walls and also at a distance on the southern side. To the west the caravans coming from the west settled and stopped at what we today call Shahdara.

It was in such circumstances that we see the advent of Akbar the Great, who decided to enclose the city in a burned brickwall. This was to protect the business community in order that they carry on their business in peace. It also afforded enough space within the walls to allow for gardens

and expansion. Akbar can truly be called the man who gave the old Lahore its present day shape.

The first brick walls to come up were those of the citadel. Built on the original mud walls, they maintained their thickness and were an example of the excellence of the builders of those days. Once the citadel walls were secured, Akbar went about building a larger and new Lahore, all enclosed within solid burned brickwalls. That enclosed Lahore is the existing old Lahore as we know it today. The new areas to the west of Bazaar Hakeeman were included, as were the huge areas to the east of the Shahalami Bazaar. The old mud walls were levelled, though traces of those walls still exist in both places.

The emperor had ten bastions built between every set of two gates. One account describes the measurements of the walls as being ten and a half meters in height and "broad enough to mount guns on the top". The western wall was later rebuilt in a straight line by Aurangzeb in pious intention of bringing the wall in alignment with his 'Badshahi Mosque'.

It was in Akbar's days that the existing gates of the city came up. In every sense Akbar is the first of two great builders of Lahore's walls. It might sound ironical, but the year 2005, some records say the month was just before the monsoons set in, is the 400th centenary of the completion of the walled city of Lahore. Our complete and total ignorance of this unique event is understandable given that there are no longer any walls to celebrate. After Akbar and with diminishing Moghal power, the city was invaded time and again. The walls began to decay. At place there were huge gaps as brick thieves, who still abound, built their houses from stolen bricks, and the law of the land, which is still somewhat similar, just turned a blind eye to these happenings. When the Afghan invader Ahmed Shah Abd'aali attacked Lahore in 1751, The walls could not withstand the siege and Mir Mannu surrendered. Thereafter the walls began to disappear as disorder spread.

It was 200 years later that Maharaja Ranjit Singh took over in 1799 and immediately decided

to rebuild the walls to its old glory. He further had a moat built around the walls, which was fed from the River Ravi. He also made sure that they were maintained and appointed Hukma Singh to further build a second wall on the outer perimeter of the moat. In away he built Lahore's second wall, though it was not that high. This ensured that Lahore could withstand any siege or attack. Never before had the city been better fortified. On Hukma Singh's death, his son, Deva Singh, took over the maintenance of the walls and moat, which had draw bridges, the last of which was dismantled in 1935. When the British took over in 1849, they set about reviewing the future of the walls of Lahore. After the events of 1857, they reached a policy decision and between 1859 and 1864 they demolished the outer walls completely and reduced the height of the inner walls by half. The moat was filled with mud and a circular garden built on it. The southern wall was deliberately demolished, as was the southern wall of the Lahore Fort. The western gate of Taxali, probably the most beautiful gateway in the sub-continent, was completely demolished. The savagery of the 'enlightened' amazed the inhabitants. The exquisite walls of Lahore were destroyed.

In 1881 the dilapidated inner walls were also destroyed and bricks used to build the Lahore Cantonment in Mian Mir. Some things never change. This went on till 1947 when during the fierce riots the remaining walls of the old walled city of Lahore were destroyed. Today a few sections of the original wall remain, with brick thieves still busy removing the loot. Such is the lay of the land as we see it today.

Every time we write about the walled city of Lahore, we must understand that the walls that were are no longer there. The few yards that remain, though legally protected, have people building their own gates in it. Imagine. There is a need to declare the old city as a protected area. Till then we can just sit back and wait for another enlightened Akbar or a moderate Ranjit Singh to come our way. — MAJID SHEIKH

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