

The gates and their special people

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THE 13 gates — *darwazas* — of Lahore, some times referred to as 12 gates and a 'mori' (hole), have played a major role in the character of the people of the city. The location of the gates with respect to proximity to power, the cultural structure of the population of each area as it evolved over time, the dominant professions, are all major reasons for the fascinating variety in the character of the people of different parts of the old walled city.

One has always maintained that the most important element in understanding Lahore are the people. This piece is about the people, and why they are what they are. Whenever Napoleon discussed politics or culture, he would first call for a map, for geography always was his starting point. Military men do stranger things than what Napoleon did, for life is not a two-dimensional affair, but much more complex.

In the case of Lahore and its gates, it is definitely a much more complex pastime. If we notice the location of the gates and the professions of the people, we can build a basic structure. Over time we can build sub-structures as the walled city expanded. That is when the picture became complex.

To the north we have three gates, they being Sheranwala, Kashmiri and Masti. The population of these gates is overwhelmingly Kashmiri and Potohari, though initially it was inhabited

by traders from central Punjab. Here we must introduce the element of time. My dear friend Sheero alias Ghazanfar Iqbal who was instrumental in me starting to write this weekly column five years ago, insisted that the people of Lahore can never be understood unless we mention the time frame when they enter the picture.

Before the 17th century, the River Ravi curled around the city, touching these gates. For this reason Sheranwala Gate was initially called Khizri Gate, named after Khwaja Khizr, the patron saint of fishermen all over the Muslim world. There is even today a street inside the old 'Khizri Darwaza' called 'Kishtianwali Gali' — or Boat Lane. I remember my late father describing to us the drawbridge over the moat at this place, and how it was destroyed during the partition riots.

For this reason, the structure of the population of the northern three gates was initially traders using boats, mostly from central Punjab. During the Sikh period a lot of Kashmiris came from the north, and naturally settled in the first place they entered. Today the mix is different with a spattering of Muslims from the northern hilly states of India and old Kashmiri families. The trading classes also have their own mohallahs.

To the west of the old city we have two gates — the Taxali and Roshni. As most invaders had a first view of Lahore from the

western side, the least gates are here. Taxali was by far the most formidable of all gates, that is till the British decided to knock it down after the 1857 War of Independence. Thus in this area the warrior classes, who became rulers, inhabited themselves. The cultures of Persia and Turkmenistan had a great deal to do with how this area developed.

To the east are three main gates, they being Akbari, Delhi and Masti. During the early Mughal days these areas did not exist, for in early maps this area was called the 'Rahra Maidan' — barren grounds. If you happen to be an avid Lahori and walk the streets, you will notice that the original walls of Lahore, all massive mud walls, ran along the main Shahalami Bazaar. When Akbar the Great built the huge fired clay brick walls of the old city between 1584 and 1598, these areas were included in the old city.

When Lahore grew in splendour in the second half of the Mughal era, these areas became trading areas, with workers from the east coming to live in the great Mughal city. By the time the Sikhs took over, these were partially inhabited and became the main horse market. Soon the caravans from India began to settle here and bazaars sprung up. The east of the old city became the trading area of Lahore, with narrow lanes for workers to live in. During the British era, and since 1947, this has developed into the main grain and goods

markets of northern India, and later, Pakistan.

To the south we have five gates, they being Bhati, Mori, Lahori, Shahalami and Mochi. The original two oldest gates of Lahore, Lahori and Mori, have a population that were originally Rajputs. They can claim, with good reason, to be the oldest populated areas of Lahore. It was through Lahori Gate that Data Ganj Bakhsh entered Lahore after being asked by his 'mushid' to proceed to this great city and join the oldest Muslims seer of Lahore, Hazrat Zanjani, who lies buried inside the Lady Atchison Hospital on Hospital Road. On entering the gate, he saw the funeral of Zanjani coming out. That is when he discovered why he had been sent to Lahore.

In those days Bhati Gate did not exist, for the wall of ancient Lahore ran along the raised line just to the east of Bazaar Hakeeman. The Mori Gate was just by the Hindu population to bring out their dead for cremation on the river that flowed just outside. It was here that Raja Rana Jaipal, the original hero of Lahore, cremated himself alive on not being able to defend Lahore against the invader Mahmood from Ghazni in Afghanistan. The site is marked by an old papal tree just to the west of Mori Gate.

Once Lahore expanded, the Bhat Rajputs expanded from Mori to Bhati, and named the gate after the main Rajput tribe,

today known as the Bhattis. The areas to the west of Lahore is overwhelmingly Rajput. In the days of Akbar, they formed a major portion of his army. With the opening of new areas inside Mochi Gate after the wall was built, the major population consisted of cavalry horsemen of Turkmenistan origin.

In the early British days almost all trades and professions of the people living inside Mochi Gate were directly, or indirectly, related to horses and the cavalry and the military. With time the trading classes evolved from these to excel in scholarship and businesses. After partition as Lahore grew, these areas faced immense pressure in terms of the population size, with old families moving out and new immigrants moving in.

Today the people of the walled city represent a very interesting amalgam of ancient Rajputs, old Sheikh families most of whom became traders, Kashmiri professionals and businessmen, and now Pathans, Afghans and Kakayzai entrepreneurs. Each area speaks a dialect of Punjabi that has a history all its own. The accents are unique, the population mixes and customs peculiar to the people. Each family is immensely proud of its own position in history and the city. But everyone has one thing in common. They all identify themselves with a gate, an outlet, an outlet that reflects the ancient roots of a very old people. — **MAJID SHEIKH**