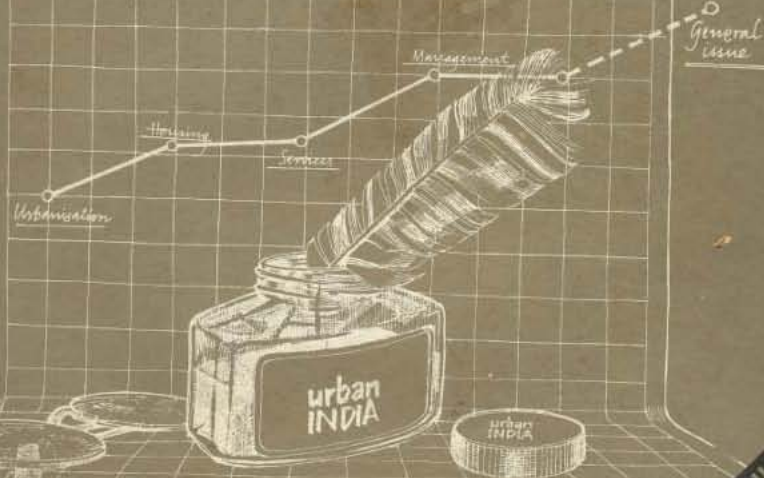


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S O N D J F M A M J J A S O N



Down with High Rise
Homes for the Aged
Bag Se Bazaar
City Profile

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BAG SE' BAZAAR

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To the Delhiwalla the words Karol Bagh symbolize a shopping paradise, an endless bazaar where, everything conceivable is available; the 'Hong Kong' of Delhi. To the resident, be he Punjabi, Tamil, Maharashtrian or Bengali, it is a place he can identify with, a 'mini Madras' or 'chota Calcutta'. To the shopowner, it is the place with the Midas touch, where his business is sure to thrive and grow, almost explode. But to the planner, it is a veritable nightmare, in which commerce transforms itself into a cancerous growth extending its uncontrollable tentacles into sleepy residential areas, virtually smothering all other land uses as it establishes itself.

Throughout the history of its development Karol Bagh has defied the planner and has gone its own way, responding to natural urban forces rather than conforming to paper plans. The planners have failed to estimate the pressures of economic growth as well as the dynamism of its residents, and the implications of both on the urban form and fabric of Karol Bagh. The plans chalked out have been unrealistic, meaningless and insensitive results of alien value judgements, about the characteristics of a 'wholesome environment'. The gap between spontaneous building activity and the planned environment has been virtually unbridgable in this sector of Delhi. In the 1961 Master Plan for Delhi, the reasons for the phenomenal growth of shopping areas have been attributed to the lack of a district shopping centre. The Master Plan outlined a solution: "The development of a District Shopping Centre which can serve the area would be in accordance with the proper development of the city and will also stop the unhealthy development of the existing disorganized

shopping centres. In other words, this would protect the area from being blighted."

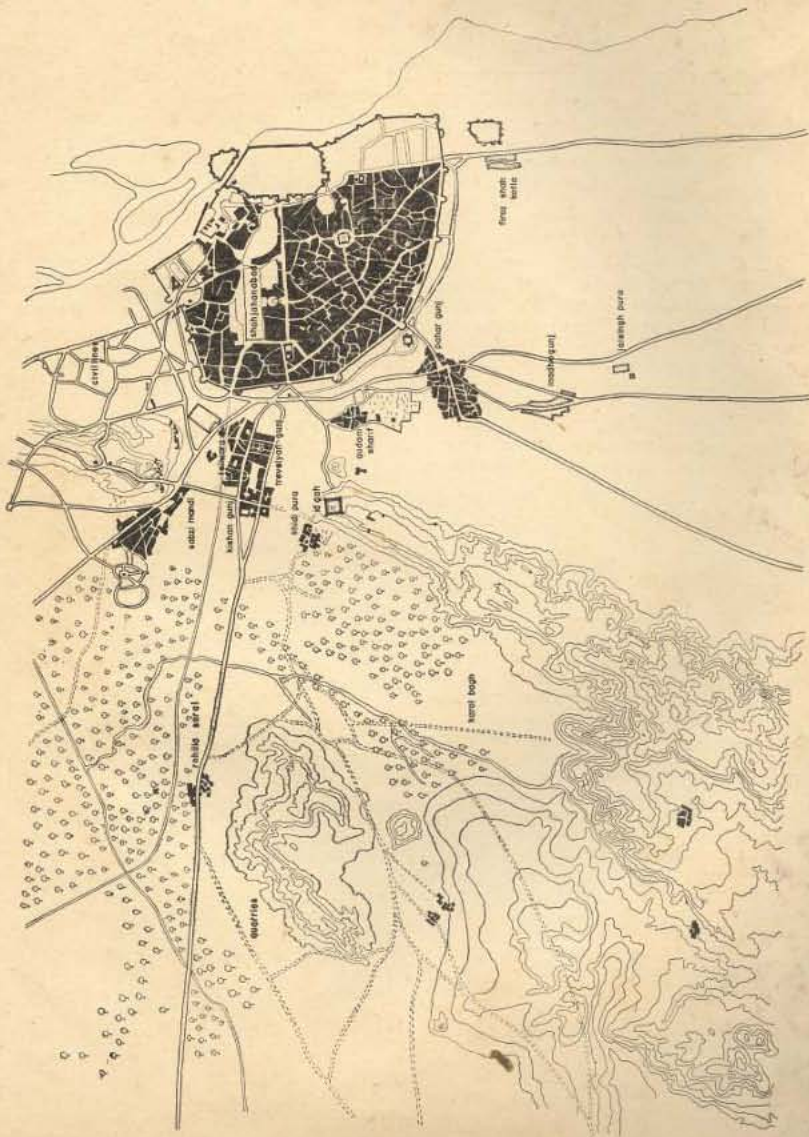
The District Centre, Rajendra Place, has been built, but it has not had the desired effect. In fact its presence has triggered off further growth of commercial activity in Karol Bagh. The area is growing from its status as the 'central retail shopping district' of the city and joining ranks with Connaught Place and the Walled City as part of the Central Business District (CBD) of Delhi.

How and why is Karol Bagh, which was once an orchard, transforming itself into a part of the CBD? A peep into the past will reveal the answers.

Karol Bagh was an orchard owned by a Mughal nobleman till the mid-nineteenth century. The orchards stretched across the plain between the rock outcrop of Anand Parbat and the ridge that lay to the west of Shahjahanabad.

In 1871 when a cholera epidemic broke out in Delhi, the Commissioner, Colonel Cracroft, attributed the cause to the filthy activities of the *chomars* and *reghars* (shoe makers and tanners) of Paharganj. The colonel had them forcibly evicted and dumped into Karol Bagh, hoping that the forested ridge would be enough of a barrier to shield the city from the diseases that the *reghars*, *chomars* and their animals might breed. The administration was blind to the fact that the cultural and economic links of the communities with the city would be virtually cut off. The descendants of these communities continue to reside in the Regharpura section of Karol Bagh.

At the grand Durbar of 1911 King George V announced that the Imperial Capital would shift from Calcutta to Delhi. The new capital was to be



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laid out to the south of Shahjahanabad while Karol Bagh was earmarked for the extension of the old city.

Eminent planners, such as Geddes and Lanchester worked out schemes that would integrate the new development with the old city, but their plans went unheeded. Officials of the Imperial Delhi Committee prepared instead a layout based on the conventional rectangular gridiron pattern extending over seven-hundred and fifty acres. The area adjacent to the ridge was allotted to the families of workers employed in the construction of the capital as well as those displaced by it. This section of Karol Bagh is known as Naiwala.

In the 1930s, Karol Bagh emerged as a predominantly institutional (Tibbia College, Ramjas College and Pusa Institute) and upper class residential area. Belying the expectations of the administration, Karol Bagh did not prove to be popular with the middle classes.

With the establishment of New Delhi as the capital in 1931, a large number of jobs were created in the administrative set-up, resulting in the large-scale migration of educated individuals from the presidencies of Madras and Bombay, the old capital of Calcutta and Punjab. The government requisitioned private houses in Karol Bagh to accommodate these petty officials.

The annual growth rate of population of Karol Bagh for the year 1931-32 was a phenomenal 30 per cent. Owing to the increase in population the urban services provided by the municipality proved to be woefully inadequate. There was hardly any street lighting, sanitation, transportation or shopping. These services had to be organized by the residents themselves at an informal level.

An old resident of Karol Bagh described Ajmal Khan Road (which today is the main shopping spine) "It was one of the oldest roads in Karol Bagh and ran

through the centre of the area. Tongas and carts were parked all over as there were no proper stands. In fact, you know the 'Bombay Cloth House' building used to be a haystack. There were only five or six shops on Ajmal Khan Road. There were two *halwai* shops. One was 'Nanak Sweet House' and the other...?' It was across the road. A vegetable seller sat outside the temple. The fellow is still alive. But nowadays he sells utensils of aluminium and stainless steel. Then, there was also this Mohan Store. He has not changed the name of his shop. In the early days it was a provision store, but during the war it became what we call a fair-price shop. It stocked only a few things—wheat, sugar, matches and cloth and sold them at controlled rates. Now it is a chemists' and general merchants' shop..."

It was only after Partition in 1947 that Karol Bagh began to emerge as a shopping area. Its transformation from a residential to a commercial district was brought about by a change in the character of the resident population.

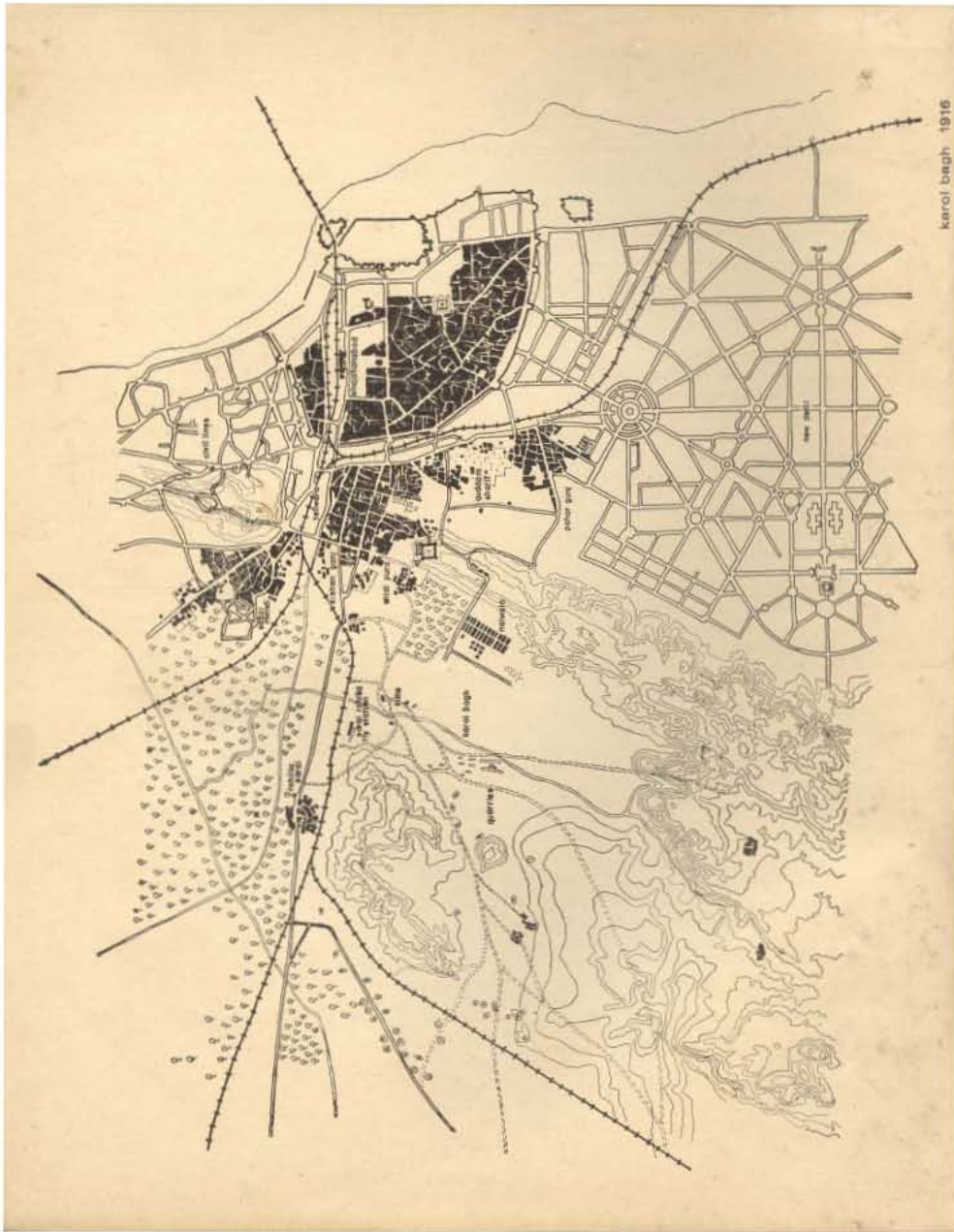
The plans chalked out have been unrealistic, meaningless and insensitive; results of 'alien' value judgements about the characteristics of a 'wholesome environment'.

In September 1947 the Hindus of Karol Bagh hounded the Muslims out of the area leaving more than 30 per cent of the houses uninhabited. The refugees from Pakistan who were pouring into the city, seeking shelter, found a haven in Karol Bagh as plots of land lay vacant and unclaimed and abandoned houses were in plenty. The refugees broke into the vacant houses or occupied and built on the empty plots virtually overnight.

For their livelihood, more than 50 per cent of the refugees turned to commerce. More than 2000 shops were established in Karol Bagh within a span of five years.

A young businessman recalled the old days with obvious pride:

"You see this house we are sitting in, we have it because of my father's guts. It was lying empty.



karol bagh 1976

He broke open the lock and our family occupied it. I remember, we were very tense for a while, not knowing whether the owner would return and have us thrown out. We also had to protect ourselves

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from other desperate men who were looking for houses to live in. We barricaded the doors, and stood on guard day in and day out. The atmosphere was one of lawlessness, in which any kind of crime could take place. Gradually the situation eased and my father started a small shop, dealing in optical goods. He had been an optician in Lahore and knew all about the business. At that time ours was the only shop on Arya Samaj road. A little later he opened a small lens manufacturing unit on the ground floor and we moved into the newly constructed first floor. The business did well and my father could afford to send us to good schools. Today, our family runs an automobile business also. We started it because this business was doing well on Arya Samaj Road. We are quite rich now. But what you have to remember is that we have made it out of sheer hard work. Of course, the crime of occupying someone else's house is on our heads but I am not ashamed of it. We had no choice. You should know that every wealthy businessman in Karol Bagh has indulged in crookery some time or the other to establish himself. Have you read *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo? He said that behind every large fortune there is a crime and that applies to Karol Bagh. Did you know that the *matka* king of Delhi has his empire in Karol Bagh? Did you know that illicit liquor is brewed in the *gullies* of Regharpura?"

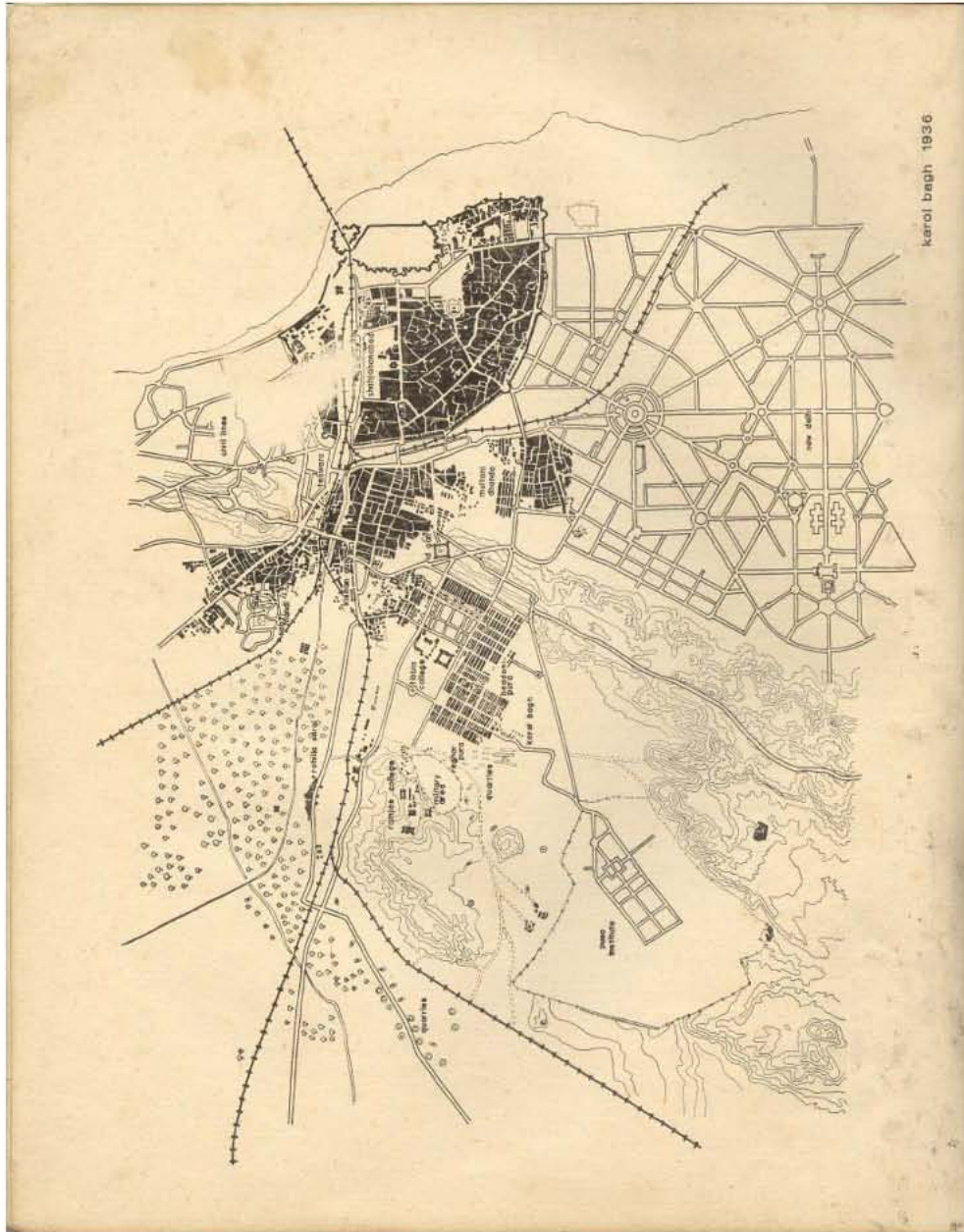
Most shopkeepers in Karol Bagh have similar success stories to relate. The establishment, expansion and specialization of the shops follow distinct trends. They are outlined here.

Establishment and Expansion

1. The commercial units set up by the refugees

were not very different to their previous business interests in West Punjab.

2. The shops tended to deal with consumer goods that did not perish easily.
3. The shops dealt with goods that were small in size and could be transported easily.
4. The investments and running capital were marginal.
5. The goods dealt with had a large volume of sale.
6. The rents and maintenance cost of the shops were low—they were in *khokas*, on pavements, carts or in small rooms facing the main streets.
7. The units of retail commerce developed links with either wholesale dealers or manufacturing units at a personal level, or set up manufacturing units themselves. For example:
 - a. A shopkeeper with textiles would establish links with a friend/relation doing wholesale textile business or would set up a dyeing and printing unit or ask his friend/relation to do so. He could then afford to reduce the profits per item and compete effectively in the market. The reduction of profit was more than made up for by an increase in sales.
 - b. A dealer in readymade garments would sell clothes sewn by his wife and her friends, or garments manufactured in a factory owned by a friend or relation.
 - c. A dealer in leather goods would hire shoemakers from Regharpura, supply them with the raw materials and inform them of the latest designs. He would only pay them labour charges. He could thus make a large profit with marginal investment while operating from a retail establishment only.



8. The manufacturing-wholesale-retail relationship was based more on mutual trust than monetary exchange. The movement of cash took place only after the goods were sold.
9. The mobility of the commercial units with respect to the kinds of goods sold was high. Stocks were overhauled often so that the shop could sell what sold in the market at the lowest possible rate; competition existed not only between similar shops but also between shops of different sizes and character. The same quality of goods would be found in a large shop on the main road, a small shop in a gully or even a pavement shop. The variety enabled the shoppers to exercise their choice and settle for the level of shop that was most acceptable. The shops at the most popular level would then emerge as the winners of the competition and establish themselves, while the losers would change the quality of the goods or switch over to another merchandise.

The unique feature of shopping in Karol Bagh is the wide economic spectrum it caters to, unlike other shopping centres in the city which attract customers from a distinct class.

With the establishment of a kind of good at a particular level in the hierarchy of shops, the process of specialization commenced.

Specialization

Specialization could occur along a road, part of a road, a gully or an area.

1. It could be a spillover of commercial activity from adjacent areas; for example, Desh Bandhu Gupta road specialized in timber goods which is a spillover from Paharganj. The motor repair, motor body building and spare parts shops from Jhandewalan spilled into Naiwalan. New Rohtak road special-

The gigantic District Centre in Karol Bagh is like Gulliver in Lilliput. It can never fit, leave alone solve its problems. It is about time planners realized that Karol Bagh is here to stay. It has a form as strong as Connaught Place and a fabric as interesting as Shahjahanabad.

lized in sanitary ware and building materials as a result of the spillover from Sadar Bazaar.

2. It could occur owing to the quality of work force residing in the area; for example, Regharpura is the area where leather, meat, and pork are available as it is occupied mainly by tanners, shoemakers and pig rearers.

Naiwalan is the area where most of the autorickshaw drivers, taxiwallas and mechanics live and the area is known for its automobile, repair and allied shops.

Western Extension Area (WEA) is essentially a middle-class locality which is why professionals have set up their offices and clinics there.

3. It could occur because of the ability to attract more customers at an aggregate level. For instance:

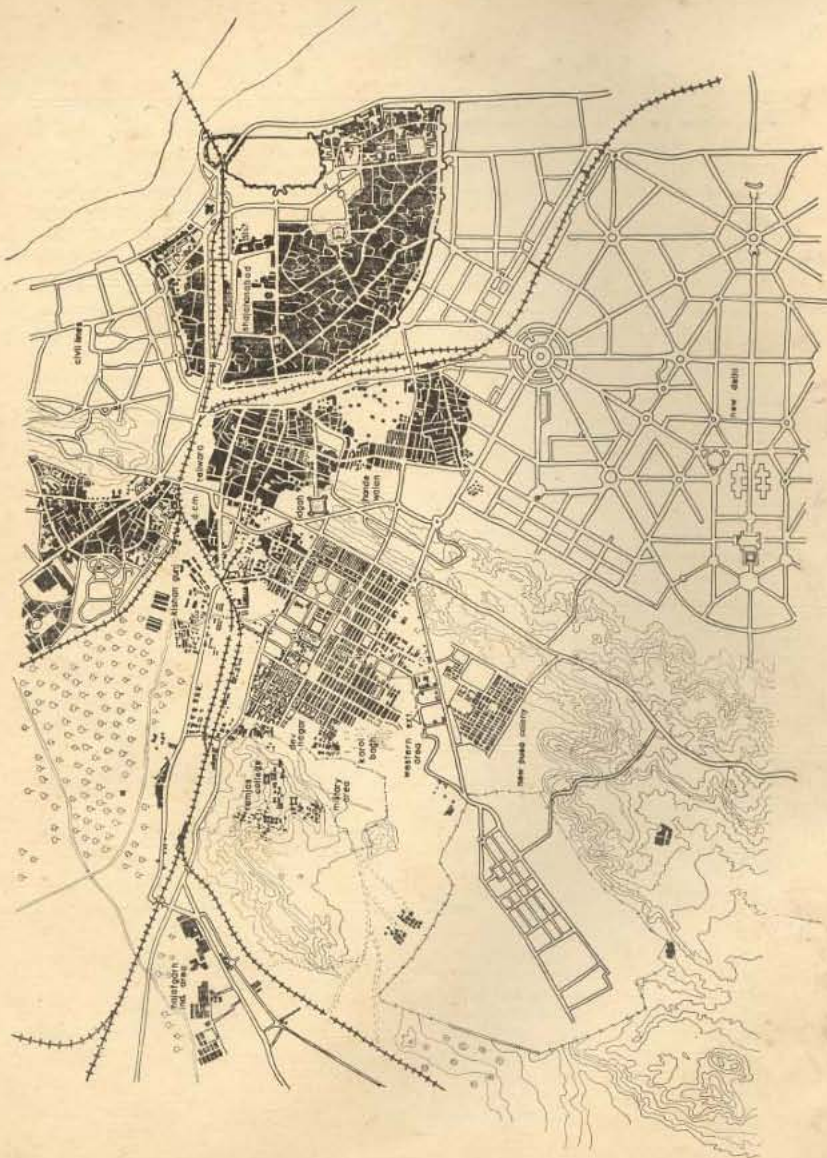
Hardhayan Singh road (Beadon Pura) is the wool and textile street.

Hardhayan Singh road (Regha Pura) is the utensil street.

Pyarelal road (Beadon Pura) and Reghar Pura is the band and tent house street and matrimonial services street

Bank street (Beadon Pura) is the jewellers street and gully No. 20 (WEA) is known as the Madras street.

4. Locational advantages in terms of function and linkages with adjoining areas also lead to specialization.



...“every wealthy businessman in Karol Bagh has indulged in crookery some time or the other to establish himself.”

Arya Samaj road in the ‘automobile street’ where there are show-rooms for cars and scooters, second-hand car shops and large spare parts shops. This is one of the main thoroughfares of Karol Bagh. The areas of Naiwalan, Thakkan Bhapa Nagar and Anand Parbat, (where there are automobile and servicing workshops, forging factories, factories manufacturing small spare parts) lie adjacent to the road or at close proximity to it. This facilitates the Arya Samaj road functioning as an outlet for automobiles and allied products.

5. Specialization also occurs owing to consumer demands.

There are *gullies* in which shops catering to the specialized needs of a regional group have come up. These were at first established for the Tamils, Bengalis, Maharashtrians, etc. residing in Karol Bagh, but now they draw clientele from the entire city.

The unique feature of shopping in Karol Bagh is the wide economic spectrum it caters to, unlike other shopping centres in the city which attract customers from a distinct class. South Extension for instance is for the upper classes, the Sarojini Nagar market is for the middle classes, while Kotla Mubarakpur and Bhogal are for the ‘poorer classes’. In Karol Bagh the sophisticated ice cream parlours and pizza places are found along with the flashy middle-class sweet houses and the nameless *dhabas*. Despite the diversity, the atmosphere of the entire

area is similar. Karol Bagh is a ‘bargain bazaar’, where the seller persuades and seduces the shopper into impulsively buying his wares. It happens in the large departmental stores, in the streets and *gullies*, as well as in the *chowks*. They are all vibrant, noisy, crowded, informal, authentic, indigenous and essentially ‘Indian’.

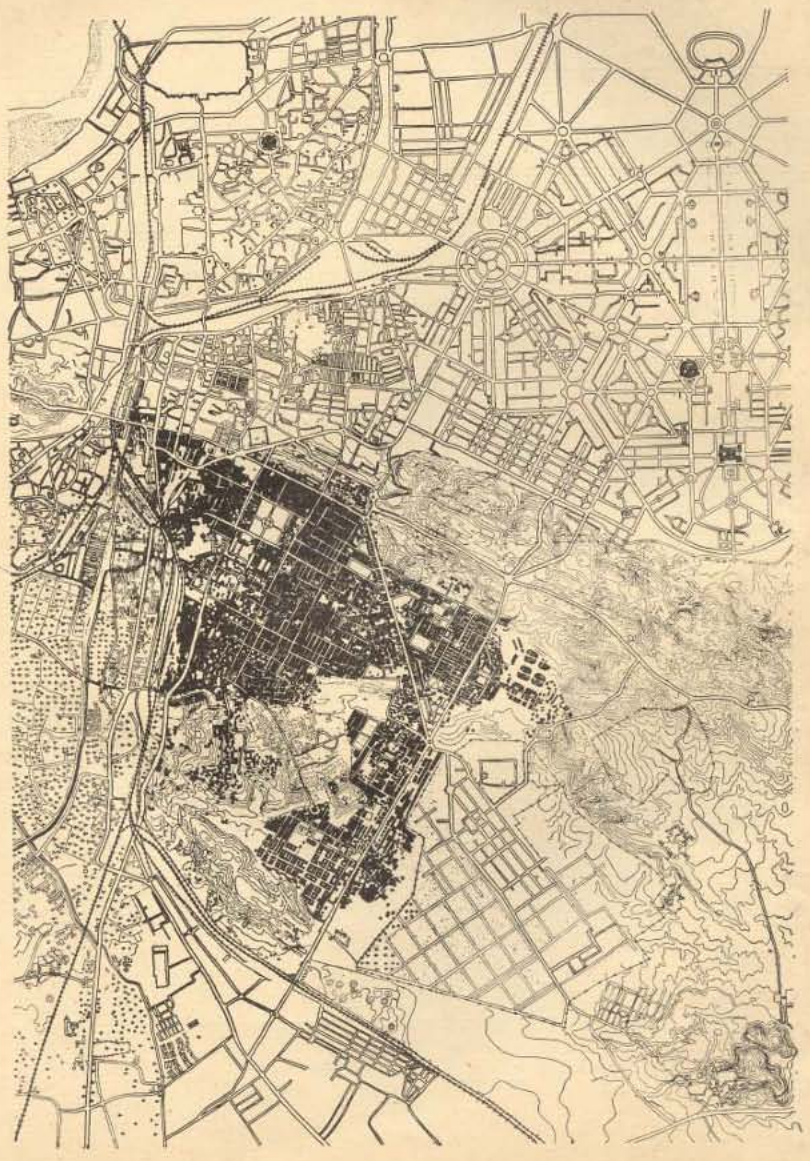
Another phenomenon that adds to the character of the place is the pattern of land use mix at the intimate scale of a house or a single plot. The *gullies* and streets of Karol Bagh are in a state of perpetual transition as shops expand from the size of a single room to occupy an entire house; the residents move into ‘posher’ colonies, in keeping with the strong desire of refugees towards upward social mobility.

The entire 750 acres of Karol Bagh is broken up into rectangular blocks, by the gridiron traffic network. The pattern facilitates the conversion of land use, as every block is accessible through a number of routes. The streets, when they turn commercial, tend to exclude vehicular traffic owing to the large number of pedestrians; and yet remain well serviced as far as transportation is concerned. They are therefore perfect shopping malls.

The inherent flexibility of the urban fabric together with the charm and vitality of its refugee Punjabi culture give Karol Bagh its unique character as the most exciting shopping area in Delhi.

Therefore, when the multi-storied District Centre, Rajendra Place was constructed in Karol Bagh, it destroyed the delicate urban fabric with its formal environment. The gigantic District Centre in Karol Bagh is like Gulliver in Lilliput. It can never fit, leave alone solve its problems. It is time for the planners to realize that Karol Bagh is here to stay. It has a form as strong as Connaught Place and a fabric as interesting as Shahjahanabad.

Based on a thesis by the author for the Masters degree in Urban and Regional Planning-1981, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi.



karol bagh 1963