

The Old city is where the organic connection survives

Hindustan Times, May 17th, 2017.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/gurgaon/i-love-gurgaon-lost-and-found-in-the-bylanes-of-tradition/story-P4GrOuL8MvmvJjbMJuvDVL.html>

Where does one begin when asked to write about the one thing that they like about a particular city? A city where one was born, in whose by-lanes one grew up and where one continues to live a semi-retired life. A city, with which one has an organic connection, is like a sibling. There is so much one loves about the city, just as there is so much that one hates about it.

The city I am referring to is Gurgaon- not the millennium city but the dusty, chaotic, disorderly and yet organic part of the city, now for some reason given the label of Old Gurgaon.

The main bazaar of the city is called the Sadar Bazaar, possibly referring to the origins of the city as a cantonment. The bazaar is about three quarters of a kilometre long and is usually so crowded that one cannot walk: instead one is pushed along. There are several lanes running parallel and perpendicular to the main street which are even more interesting. Walking through the main road and its offshoots is an amazing educational experience- in commerce, in anthropology and indeed in history.

Geography first. The bazaar runs essentially in an east-west direction. The eastern end of the bazaar is the old telephone exchange, a decrepit single storied building where I remember seeing an old style manual exchange in the late 1960s. The western end is a less than imposing Jama Masjid. The town used to start at the eastern end of bazaar where even now a caravanserai, Kamal Sarai exists. To the south of the bazaar were the civil lines. The mandatory park in civil lines, called Company Bagh till recently (though the name had officially changed to Kamla Nehru Park even in my childhood) is in a low lying area between the bazaar and the civil lines. To the north is a locality founded by a Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Jacomb in 1861 and still called Jacobpura.

The architecture of the bazaar was fairly standard- shops on the ground floor with habitation above. The shops sold everything- from hookah tobacco to Bata shoes to traditional sweets like *ghewar*. However, since this was the market town for the agricultural hinterland, most of the shops were selling agricultural produce and cattle feed.

Market forces changed all that. Given the enormous increase in real estate prices, the majority of the shops are now jewellery and sari showrooms. What is more, the top floors have also been converted into shops. A few old shops persist- like the famous Prabhati Pansari whose stock of traditional herbs would put *babas*-come-lately to shame. The shopkeepers have also found an ingenious way of making money- they “rent” out the road in front of their shop to hawkers selling imitation Levis and Ray bans! Some have even let out parts of their shops to that ubiquitous small town institution, China Bazaar where everything is for Rs 50/-!

The more interesting parts of the bazaar are its offshoots. The wholesale cereal market shifted to Naya Bazaar, a road parallel to the main road. And then there are the small *galis* each having shops selling a particular commodity. *Churiwali gali* sells only bangles, while *buttonwali gali* has rows of shops selling buttons of all shapes and sizes; there is a row of shops selling cosmetics and materials for beauty parlours and there is even a lane where all the shops specialise in making rubber stamps. And if it is cleaning materials you desire, there is the *jhaduwali gali* too!

The experience of walking and shopping in the bazaar is an interesting one. The diversity of customers- from villagers shopping for hookah tobacco to Afghan medical tourists (who incidentally, would give even the *marwaris* a run for their money when it comes to bargaining) bargaining for clothes is fascinating. And the shops are not just locations of commerce- one also gets the latest town gossip there. Not for me the homogeneity and predictability of the air-conditioned malls- where the architecture, décor, the shops and indeed even the customers would not be out of place in a suburban strip mall in the USA. I would rather have the cacophony, the chaos, the heat and dust of Sadar Bazaar. It just is more organic and natural than the artificial antiseptic ambience of a Mall.

Shobhit Mahajan

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

May 12th, 2017.